

The End / Of Stars

by  
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Part I.

Alachuete

*Life is the subtle art of  
letting go and keeping on.*

*The worst tragedy is to obey  
without desiring to do so.*

ON THE NATURE OF TRAGEDY  
(A mediation on fear.)

I. A man wrote letters to Sisyphus, never arriving. Instead, each letter upon reaching the lowest part of the mundane mountain was carried back to the man who wrote it, followed by another, another, each one echoing, echoing.

Didn't matter the contents or texture of the paper or time of day. Was enough the action was halted before an end was reached.

He also often waited for the world to end, letting loose the crow sin upon everything to burn everything to ash. Nothing happened of course. The indecisive assassin of his faults never ripened to the scorn needed to end things.

So, like the letters, upon this, the man merely waited.

I've often thought about him or that wicked little blade of a girl fantasizing about the murder of her incestuous father or the land of star-crossed lovers fated to desire and yet never reach the contented shore of a life's right end.

And the word dripping into each of their beings is always the same. Tragedy.

It is an old word with old faults attached to it and has become a byword for human misery. But that limits the geography of the word. Tragedy is a different animal than simple suffering.

It is one's own worst self after all.

Take our man penning his letters to Sisyphus again.

Why is he doing this?

Does he seek special knowledge, is he trying to comfort the condemned, is the man Sisyphus's son trying to tell his father all will be right even as the letters never come? Or are the letters some damned debt the damned has yet to pay?

If one deigns the motive then the story pivots from absurdity to despair to uncertainty, all without changing any other details. The letters are still sent, but the letters never arrive. The man sends them, the man receives them. Sisyphus does not. Without the reasoning for the man's decisions, there is no tragedy, only action, and counteraction. That is all.

Or take the daughter desiring her father's end. He is a monster, and in her dreams, she fantasizes about killing him. Does she succeed? Or does she forgive him, allowing him to never face justice, or does she destroy him some other way? If the father is the figure on which tragedy descends then his actions must lead to ruin but if it's her story would killing be a good deed or her inability to end this nightmare be tragic? If she has no choice is her violence a means of salvation or will it corrupt her?

Divorced from motivation the inability or ability to end lives is not tragic, nor absurd. It is like the formula of an equation written in the dark; one may know it is there but without the solution, all one hears is the scratching of something etching onto a void. For this reason, tragedy always begins with the mentality of its primary actor and all others reverberate from this singular creature whose decisions ripple outward like an insidious wave.

Or consider the land of star-crossed lovers. In this country all are discontented in their desires, they who never find their beloved. But why do they stay? If there is some bland alchemy keeping them rooted to the ground then the story is tragic since even if they wish exile they can't.

That word, "can't," forms the underlying principle of tragedy. One can't be humble, turn away, accept they were wrong, or give up. Some mechanism is bearing down upon them making them marionettes, but they are marionettes not because this external force compels them, but rather because this external force conforms to their preconceived notions of reality.

There is a little madness in small things that tragedy amplifies, turning one's missing the mark at the aim of a better life to a warped pursuit whose arrow pierces only one's own heart in the end. But there is more to tragedy than merely that one word, 'can't.'

II. Tragedy hinges upon what is left unsaid as much as what is said. If I mentioned to you an ocean of sunflowers billowing in a summer breeze, endless waves of green and yellow, and then at the end spoke of a single rivulet of red dripping down into a barren trough at the edge of that sea of sunflowers, beside the dried rivulets of other streaks of red, what have I said? I have given no characters, have mentioned nothing, but this is enough for you to piece together some ending, *of something*.

Without saying more, I have humanized *a colour*, and you may have empathized with whatever has happened, and to whom.

Or imagine the sinister voice and happiness in small things, some simple story of a man always smiling and you at the end are allowed to peer into his thoughts, listen for a time to that sinister voice always speaking to him and the nightmares it is speaking of.

Yet still he is always smiling, smiling, smiling . . .

There may be some tragedy in such a man, or a colour, but since so little is given, the entire geography of the world shrunk down it is up to the perspective you are given to determine the rightness of that world. And nothing else.

This is often by design.

If one were permitted to see many lives it would be impossible for all to equally suffer and if one were given the necessity of showing the fate of an entire world then even the most savage cruelties pale against the most glorious realities.

Out of this emerges the idea that tragedy is the opposite of comedy, but is not. It is an epic. For an epic is the opening of the

world, the vast myriad *labyrinth* of place and *structure*, of lives, of beasts, of gods, of monsters, where the goal is not to retreat or explore the psyche but to forget the psyche and explore all else.

Epic is the opening of things and tragedy is the closing down of things. A tragedy hinges upon the examination of the inner life. One may be given no more than a mouth lit upon a stage speaking and out of this can emerge tragedy. Such despair is truncated, cut to its essential flaw, for one might find beauty in the empty openness where the expectation was otherwise.

One may even make a tragedy from a shade of red dripping into a dung-coloured trough, slowly ebbing away into an ocean the colour of itself . . .

III. Is there a certain psychology to tragedy, some means of knowing where a tragedy is born? I believe it stems from the *ideal* of hubris.

Let us take apart our man and his letters. There is nothing difficult in the writing of a word, nor any difficulty in sending those words elsewhere. But Sisyphus is condemned to the rolling of a stone forever, so when is there time for him to stop and read? And who journeys to the country of the dead? Surely the man is not doing this since he receives the letters back and if he were the sender, he'd only need to send one once to show its absurdity.

But our man assumes all is as it should be, assumes he understands, and that whatever he is trying to say is important enough even to make a condemned man stop to listen for a while.

The normalcy of assuming one knows is more destructive than any other sin of human invention. More ruin is caused by the assumption of our knowledge than its proof, and tragedy as its first principle is an inherent arrogance that the damned expect to know something, believe they know it, and when they discover to their horror they do not it is too late to save themselves.



But why is this so? Because we are creatures whose first principle to our being is our fear.

Our fears are not irrational signposts of some primitive mind but highly refined warnings of sophisticated intelligence. Fear motivates us to action, prevents us from ruin, and tells us of our failings. Fear is our friend.

The question of what you fear is more telling than asking what you love or what you hate because fear is not about our decisions but our understanding. I may fear fire or water because I understand both. I may not fear the blaze of a supernova or drowning in a world of water without land or sky. I may imagine such a blaze, such a place but knowing I will never reach them what reason have I to fear them?

I may fear monsters and demons but these too come from my understanding, for until these modern times the only explanation available was a world populated by such. So, if I believe that this world is filled with demons and beasts of uncertainty my fear is rational, at least to myself, and if my fears exist in the latticework of my understanding then I am not irrational, I am aware.

The danger comes when one goes from imagining monsters are real to imagining one is immune from them and therefore immune from all beneath them. If I imagine demons to be princes of the air and then a plague emerges and I surmise since never have the demons I feared harmed me so too could no plague harm me then I am rendered tragic.

Even a fear based on one's imagining is still meant to warn.

But when we are inundated in fear, when we cannot tell what to fear or not, when told again and again of our greatness, that nothing is beyond us or that we tell this to ourselves then the grim uncertainty is masked by the grimmer certainty we are targeted for greater things, regardless what we do.

Tragedy results.

Life is a fragile thing. It has no guarantee. There is no final judgement nor can one magically arrive at reaching life, having *Achieved*. There are no rules to prove one's life secure, perfect, and without flaw, nor is there some alchemy upon which if one knows the formula can emerge from this existence unscathed.

The difference between the hard-won life and the tragic life is not suffering but the reasoning behind it. The man aware of his fear is aware of his limits and a man aware of his limits knows where not to tread. A tragic figure is one to whom the geography is always the same since they cannot help but move onto dangerous ground willingly, only after discovering the error of their being.

This is because if one cannot accept their fear one cannot listen to the limiting of themselves, nor know where not to go, and so often go willingly through a haphazard wilderness.

But the eye of the world is blind. No one is watching. There is no honour nor glory in intentionally throwing their self toward ruin. There is only ruin and the individuals blinded by a glory which was never there.

I know I am repeating myself. That too is tragic though.

For too often the tragic figure will not simply step to ruin but do so again, again, *again*, repeating themselves without learning the error of their being, unchanging as a stone until a stone is the only marker left to them.

The tragic figure conceals their fears nor accepts they are as flawed-fearful as another. Yet this they know not, that where fear is absent bravery is not present. Bravery is not the absence of fear but the fulfilment of it. One is brave in proportion to one's fears and acceptance of them and actions made afterward are not toward bravery but pushed against terror.

Yet tragedy is often the opposite of this.

One does not reach toward one's fears but soothes oneself with the "knowledge" they are beyond such petty things, that they "the hero" are not subject to the laws of diminishing. This leads to ruin for in every journey you must learn, either by the journey itself, by some insight made along the way, or by what you find at the end. The tragic figures say of such journeys that they will learn nothing, not by the start nor the end. And should they learn it has come at a moment too late to affect the outcome making the insight as worthless as if they had learned nothing at all.

Insight should reward those who achieve it not torture those who achieve too late but this is the role tragedy takes in penning a life along the dimensions of itself. However, it seems that the ones meant to comprehend this are the ones who willingly fail to understand it.

But there is more of course.

IV. There is a souring of hands and minds to tragedy. There is the knight of infinite regression and resignation. There is life in the dark unwild. There is an invisible tendril in the air.

The tragedy must also extend outward from the known to the unknown, must extend forth like a blade invisibly into something approximating reality while never quite seeming real. The "invisible tendril of the air" is the sense that one is immersed by something unseen, some force about which one has no power to control but also something one can blame and set their hatred upon rather than turning the insight toward themselves.

And the dark unwild is our own life and world, distorted, out of sync. The tragic soul can see what others see but does not see what is truly there. This extends beyond mere delusion into the reflection of that first final fatal flaw since they imagine themselves immune from deception so cannot see it permeating from their deluded selves.

The knight? There always stands before/behind a figure resigned to the fate of returning, seeking to move forward while *always* moving behind, always a Sisyphus dimly aware of the mountain ahead, of the mountain behind.

But there is another thing regarding tragedy beyond the dark unwild or the unseen. There is a mentality in tragedy summed up as so; "When I die so dies the world with me." They are *important*, their sufferings a unique event, their deaths the endings of worlds.

Sisyphus is suffering not merely in death's country, for he was the wisest so his is the most acute of sufferings. A man reaching his end is not simply dying but is the whole of worlds, his passing into night rendering worlds nighted as well.

But there is worse to tragedy than suffering or imagining oneself godlike. There is the possibility of escape.

Imagine if those suffering souls noted for their miserable ends could find an escape, or one facet of them, that in the garden of forking paths, some fled the wrath of their flaws.

Knowing this would it be a lesser or greater tragedy to those who did not escape? For after all they are *important*, they are a unique event on the canvas of the universe.

However, if you could turn and see a version of you who never suffered or had the flaws you had would this be a glimpse toward a reachable heaven or a view toward the hell you are living now?

Why even ask?

Because a chief element behind the tragedy is a question of change. If one is arrogant, if one damns themselves at a certain instant this then turns their demise against their reasoning, for their behaviour is what sets the path to their end.

What happens if one could find another way though? What happens if the noose can be escaped and the tragic figure is shown this?

For a tragedy to *be* a tragedy there *should* be no alternate path, no vision of a life sans flaw for such a thing negates the tragic into potential and turns an ending into a multitude of doors. But this leads to the final question.

Why would one even pen a tragedy?

V. This has been a savage few years.

It has seemed the world closed upon itself leaving us all trapped behind doors, limiting ourselves to a few bland rooms, diminishing ourselves a day at a time.

I could mention the dead and the plague but it is enough that there are dead and there is a plague, for there are always dead, always plagues. We step from one forking garden to another across the dimensions of our lives and looking back are presented with terrors ranging from mundane to gross to cruel. At each turning of the tide one stares broadly into death and whatever shape death takes is always the most fearsome to us.

There is no such thing as a day sans fear, no country where darkness does not appear nor life so glorious one cannot weep.

But suffering is not merely itself. Suffering is a fulcrum.

One steps upon the scales to be slashed at by one's inaction or by some bland innocence or for no reason at all, or *instead* by one's behaviour, one's hubris, one's words, one's deeds, one's thoughts, all meant to lead us to suffer still.

It is human nature to expect the worst to fall upon the worst, but this is not true. To die is not the measuring of life or the fulfilment of its time but any life cut short, regardless of the year. The human mind cannot accept this.

A tragedy is written as prayer, a psalm to show that the darker country of a cynical age is still predicated by the first fault of one who will reap what they sowed. Strange to call tragedy prayer but in seeing a tragedy there comes the idea that somewhere or at some time one will be punished for what they

are, meaning others cannot be punished for they are not objects of tragedy.

The word used is catharsis, *release*, but one could consider it as placing one's fears and pride upon a fictional scaffolding, and then allowing it to burn.

Tragedy is a kingdom set on fire meant to be destroyed for the act of destruction permits the observer to feel a cleansing of their terrors. In witnessing another's passing through ruin the slings of our misfortunes lose their sting. If one is faulted through no fault of their own it is absurd, but seeing this ruinous formula going back like spools of thread to first actions taken in ignorant pride, to see the results of this experiment play out then suddenly one has a plumb line to gauge their own lives by.

And which a more horrible result, suffering for no reason or to suffer and see each step how it was your own doing, having neither gods nor fate nor oracles to blame, having not even the mad invention of forgiveness for if all were caused by you can you forgive yourself, knowing the pride you were born with, leading to this outcome? That is the trap of such figures, but through their entrapment, we feel free.

VI. Finally, there is the question of when a tragedy has succeeded or failed. It must elicit a certain catharsis, yes, but there are other matters. There must be a reveal of truth for the tragic figure thereby allowing them to see the depths of their mistakes. Their punishments must often exceed their errors, not to make them sympathetic but because their pride becomes the fuel to turn even a small mistake into a great inferno of a funeral pyre.

And lastly, the world itself must be demonstrated to suffer the loss in tandem with the tragic soul. It is not enough for one to suffer but all those who know the tragic figure must be distorted like floating leaves caught in the rippling of a stone cast into a lake.

The tragic figure may not simply be allowed to injure themselves but by their actions, those adjacent them must also lose.

This is because the world is interconnected so a loss of one is a loss to all and because they are given high station, warping the lives of those below them without regard.

It is here the tragic story holds its greatest promise for if some “higher” soul can diminish all then equally some other figure placed in the same position, given the same choice, can choose better. One life can serve just as well as another, one would be forgiven for thinking, but tragedy depends upon a specific mindset. Not everyone can be made tragic and for every stumbling king there is always the potential that another will rise to the occasion.

Tragedies when done well allow one to see the other side of existence, to present reality where actions truly have consequences, where behaviour has rational meaning, but also where the potential is ever present if one could choose the worst, we can choose the better.

As I said it is a prayer summed as so; “This is the ground I will not tread having seen where it leads to.” Tragedy is a step out of sync with the rhythm of the world.

When done well, we afterward know, where best to stand.





## ON ABSURDISM AND THE SURREAL

I. A man sent letters to Tantalus. They sometimes arrived.

Standing amidst waters with low-hanging fruit always out of reach, waters always receding his grasp, this starved man would be given a letter about the same time every day, always asking how he was and what he was thinking of.

Reaching Tantalus required great effort.

The messenger would have to scale a jagged mountain which was his own tooth, shrinking down to the smallest fragment of himself then burrow into soft stone and be confronted by a vast underground valley. There at the heart of it lay a great spider giving birth to men and women who all had blue eyes.

The spider was like Eve and the creatures she bore as unlike herself as the messenger was unlike her.

She spoke no word nor did he speak to her and her children were always of the moment, being born, living, perishing in their garden ground lit by a black sun, and dying in a moment, becoming wraiths after, till by the third day the entire valley was inundated in seas of transparent forms, all whispering words the messenger did not know, could not know, nor could they know having had no time to understand speech.

After this, the messenger would have to descend to the country of mad leviathans, gigantic giants who mutely swung at one another breaking themselves to shards, grim carcasses of their immortality making them all blunt beasts neath a moonstone sky.

And then for an hour, he found himself on the moon where barren trees sang silences only he could hear, then returned given no reason why.

After this were a series of other realms. He found himself before the massive skull of Alalakh where great bees had made of it their hive as honey poured from empty sockets of the mad god's eyes and the messenger would have to pass through the broken

jaws watching the gold-black bodies winnowing through the air, each sting the length of the messenger's arm.

There was another where women gave birth to snakes beside a red dragon Nile.

Another where an Egyptian barge of the dead had been entombed and left as the last child of an unnamed king in a desert nameless beside a city desolate in a wasteland grey.

There was even one where giant moonstone-coloured spiders broke the limbs of one another, all having blue eyes like men and women and in thinking back the messenger would always wonder how this country related to what he had seen before.

Finally, just before reaching the country of the dead, the messenger would lay eyes upon the d'kystria solcaina. These were a race of beings in a valley garden much like the spider's own with a black sun singing overheard, lit in colours they were only dimly aware of.

When born they appeared as the messenger himself but as they aged slowly their mouths sealed and stitched, wings grew from their broken backs and by the eldest year they had all retired to become cicadas, mute, starving, thirsting, unthinking. Each one knew this was their final fate and yet despite all else, none longed for a death preceding this living death.

And so finally the messenger reached Tantalus, delivered his letter, returned and the next day did the same thing all over again.

Considering the contents of the letter was the effort worth it? And if the messenger knew the contents would this change the man's motivation in what he did?

II. The tragedy has been the geography of the last century but striding aside it was another kingdom, an adjacent country known as the absurd. And beside it across the waters lay the island of the surreal. The tragedy was meant to cleanse the soul of suffering, presenting a means of relief from pain. The truth is otherwise.

In the incomprehensible decades that came after the end of empire and deaths of gods, even tragedy felt limiting to some. A rational universe was seen as an affront so absurdity took its place upon the stage.

The journey of the messenger and the contents of the letter, do they seem reasonable to you? And the places he visited, the things he saw, did they make logical sense, did they visit upon him grief, pain, joy, sorrow? Were his reactions even mentioned at all? Was he resigned, joyful, angry to do the same act again, and *again*? Was he in pain before the journey, during, after? And was there some hubris in anything he did?

A tragedy depends upon a rational universe being created where one can pinpoint moments of failure and the reasoning behind it. One could even argue that in an *irrational* universe tragedy provides a means of knowing where not to stand.

But in a universe of increasing complexity, even tragedy gave way to the absurd, to characters and places designed not to elicit our catharsis but to deny our senses and our understandings.

The messenger is on a journey whose outcome does not matter. Tantalus may read the letters or not but since the content is so little the energy expended exceeds all measures of common sense.

But neither messenger nor sender are acting contrary to their purpose. If this story were meant as tragedy the act of sending the letter would be an act of hubris, of the overweening pride of the individual. But he has no pride, is acting as mundanely as any other would and since the letters arrive this implies a rationality to an irrational state.

For he does succeed. Were this a tragic story the messenger would never succeed and this lack of success would damn him or he would succeed and by his determination suffer greatly.

Here though there are no consequences to what he does.

None of the experiences along the journey elicit meaning. This dismantles the first part of a tragic work, that one suffers but is capable of learning. What if the road ahead twists in such a way that no meaning can be found? What if one encounters what is impossible without remedy? What if a tragedy is not laid out as a cause-effect but withheld from the audience, leaving confusion in its wake?

This sense of confusion has become a purpose unto itself. In a country without gods or kings, without *structure*, the sheer absurdity of living takes darker tones. For though all suffered many imagined a balancing of scales, some deity watching all, determining just and unjust even if rewards and punishments were withheld in this life.

This secondary existence, this perfect balancing is the taproot from which tragedy is derived so if this is cut so too is tragedy cut from its moorings, leading to the absurd, and from that to the surreal. Take again the story of our messenger.

Nothing that happens to him makes sense yet since everything that happens to him is tangentially knowable the mind fills in the gaps. Spiders, moonstones, wraiths, titans, leviathans, skulls, bees, cicadas, we know these things even if their arrangement seems nonsensical. And since we know these are presented nonsensically, we lay them out in our minds and assign meanings they might not otherwise have.

The surreal is an idea that when presented with irrationality our unconscious selves emerge to derive meaning from what we cannot consciously deign. This has come to mean something bizarre but in reality, the surreal is meant to elicit a

response deeper than our conscious selves, a point pivoted by both absurdity and tragedy.

One elicits meaning based on what we know, what we believe, and what lies at the source of ourselves. Tragedy provides a universe of suffering turned inward, absurdity provides a world without meaning, surrealism provides a world without meaning which can only be unlocked when sufferings turned inward become a language turned outward, when one's perceptions act as a cipher to explain an outward soul.

Our messenger explores a universe of madness but is only mad so long as he doesn't try to explain it. Any explanation will do as if there is one. As such he makes not one journey but an infinite journey, each time deriving meanings from the images he sees, each time trying to find the one right answer to his perceptions, and each time having to try again since what he sees cannot be consciously explained but only subconsciously regarded with meaning. The surreal is the religion and blasphemy of the modern age.

III. Why did this change occur? When did absurdity and the surreal become a foundation of the modern? I believe it has always been. The difference is simply we now have a language meant to be filled by it.

I believe our need to create a stable world is always challenged by an irrational other but though these realms existed they were invisible, touched only by artists and philosophers until the scope of the irrational burst upon all else.

The tragedy existed as scaffolding meant to burn. But the absurd is a place without a meaning ascribed to suffering, without direction. Hence hell and heaven lose their moorings too.

Take our hypothetical figures, our Sisyphus, our Tantalus.

In most stories, Sisyphus is an absurd symbol of unceasing meaningless toil but I believe he is more a sign of the tragic than

the absurd. For it is his rational mind, his genius which lays out this punishment since because of his genius there always remains in his mind potential he finds the key to escape. Sisyphus is not condemned to roll the stone due to true compulsion but because he defeated the gods twice and so if he continues on, then the odds of his success, in his own mind, increase.

Now take Tantalus.

He is condemned to stand in a pool of water with fruit hanging overhead, having no means of reaching either. He is condemned for his crimes but his fate is absurd more than Sisyphus. *Tantalus is dead*. Hunger or not, thirst or not, he is *dead*. Sisyphus is a creature beyond life. His actions continue but he is not subject to mortal concerns. Tantalus feels hunger and thirst though he is past all mortal reality. Even if given the chance to drink, to eat, *he is dead*. What sustains him? How much does a dead man need to eat?

Sisyphus will continue to roll the stone but his prison is his own actions. Tantalus is doomed regardless of what happens to him. He may eat or drink, or not, but cannot die, cannot suffer beyond his thirst or hunger, cannot even be rewarded by his arrogance since his punishment is meaningless. Nothing he does will change the results so his punishment or its end are the same.

There is no point behind it.

If Tantalus were given endless feasts and enough wine to fill an ocean his very nature is such it wouldn't matter. That is the difference between the absurd and the tragic. Sisyphus may never succeed but he is bound by *his actions* in such a way success is possible, if he lets go. He is his own prison. Tantalus is bound in such a way even if he lets go, he gains no reward, no punishment. Sisyphus may one day defeat the gods. Tantalus may never defeat a punishment that exceeds any rational escape.

When Sisyphus ceases his pride, *he is free*.

Tantalus cannot cease being dead so starving or feasting are equally pointless to him.

IV. The emergence of this absurdity permeates our modern age. I believe this is part of the reason tragedies have slowly become extinct.

As a genre, tragedy has been declining for centuries and though it exists it does so in such a way as to be aware of its own limiting geography. It is a continent that is eroding day by day.

Perhaps in time, it will blossom to a new entire ecology of further tragedies but no one can know.

All that is known is that in this age one does not expect a perfectly mechanical universe so one does not expect an exacting cause and effect to life.

This has become a time of interpretation, a new ecology of facets, mirrors, and prisms, all saying something yet moulded in such a way anyone can hear anything they want to hear.





## Part II.

Bellum Omnium Contra Omnes:  
*A war of all against all.*



## Prologue

I was sitting in my office, having nothing else to do. I glanced about at some of the furniture, pretending interest in the wall across my desk, turned to the map of England behind my head, felt a touch of the torpid heat outside, then rose and went to the window beside me. Opening this it was still India.

I hadn't left. India hadn't left either.

Then back to my desk.

There were papers, they were forms mostly, but with our exit soon the papers may as well have been blank. I couldn't concentrate on them anymore.

I turned back to the story I had been writing.

*The jungle had greened and blackened. Still a shade of red. Edmund was walking through. The weight of her body he did not feel. Dream then. While walking.*

*Jungle was telephone poles. Birds on telephone wires. Pink and green, and blue, and orange, sometimes a colour to a bird, sometimes all colours mingling together so one had the shades of all.*

*Other times world was just black and white. Couldn't tell colours anymore.*

*Weight was starting to creak into him.*

*Behind the battle. How many dead could not tell.*

*Ahead a city. Not his own.*

*Had been days before. He was a soldier, this his assigned dominion. Now the country slipped. Now **a stranger in a stranger land.***

*Weight was beginning to tear at him. Ignoring it he focused on a dream. Ignoring dream he focused on the massacre.*

*Ignoring this? There was nothing further to grasp his mind toward.*

The story continued, but I stopped here.

Perhaps I would publish it.

But there was still more inside of me.

And I couldn't grasp it all . . .

"Why you're still here!"

I glanced up to see my old friend as he entered the room.

"Yes, well, not much else to do is there?"

"Edmund my boy, I thought you were going home."

*Weight was starting to creak into him.*

"Haven't decided on where home is yet."

"I see."

He took the chair opposite mine, sat, and studied me.

"Is something wrong Edmund?"

I handed the story to him, and he glanced at it and handed it back.

"Another one? How many does that make?"

"One hundred and eight."

"You've written that many? I didn't think you had the time. But what does that have to do with our leaving?"

"Even if I leave it won't leave me."

"Ah." He said it slowly like the exhale of a wound from a serpent's tooth. "So, all of these tales are about your time here. This is the story of you and . . ."

"The girl, yes. Wrote to excise it but memory's still there."

"I don't think a man forgets by writing it down my boy. You forget by doing other things."

"Like leaving?"

"Exactly. You *can't* leave yet, though," he said slowly, comprehension coming at last to him, "*can you?*"

"Still waiting. Trying to find home."

"She didn't . . ."

"Haven't heard from Cordelia in months."

"What about your brother Edgar?"

"He vanished alongside Cordelia."

"Vanished together or . . . not?"

"Vanishing kind of defeats the purpose of figuring that out. If I knew they left together I wouldn't be uncertain, but I just don't know."

"Well, why don't we leave the office, go to the nearest place that serves decent spirits, and forget everything for a time. You can figure out leaving after that."

I agreed.

We descended the stairs which even now remained haphazard, I still forgetting how one of the steps was crooked, almost falling, but we reached the bottom safely enough.

Outside the sun poured down and we were saturated in the sounds of the milling crowds. Olive dark faces peered everywhere and my friend smiled at them, some smiling back, others aware of our departure regarding us as so many past conquerors were regarded, something to be jotted in their history books and taken out and recalled only as needed.

A century or more of British rule would in time be ranked alongside the Moguls and the Greeks, brushing against this country, changing it but never ruling it.

Never really.

We passed time in silence through the streets, I aware of the gaping void in me, of what I was trying to tell, to fit the mosaic together.

We arrived at a place which sold spirits. I could have called it a pub but the name loses meaning here. In the cool darkness we drank a time, my friend mentioning when the ships were leaving, I mentioning my commission was over anyway but still wasn't certain I was leaving.

"What would you do here?" he asked.

"I've thought about that. I think I will become a man of mystery. I think I will stumble upon some dark evil, some

criminal organization devoted to, I don't know, narcotics perhaps, find some hidden valley in the north and adopt the guise of some avenging angel.

"I will take some other name and it will become famous in its crusade against the criminal element. They may even make a movie out of my exploits. I hear Preston Pyne likes heroic tales."

My friend laughed good-naturedly and I downed his pint.

"And what, Chase Winters would be your love interest?"

"Well, Pyne and Winters are married, and famous."

He grew quieter.

"When was the last time you saw them?"

"Five years ago, before they moved to Hollywood."

"I always thought if she hadn't married Pyne she would have married you. I'm not sure I ever completely liked Cordelia."

I was silent too a time.

"I'm not sure I ever liked her either."

"So why this delay?"

I then explained the story a bit more.

"That is massive. I don't think that would be easy to tell.

But that doesn't explain your staying here. A man can tell a story anywhere. You know that."

"I know. I'll have to leave. But as long as I don't know where to go, I don't know where to start the story."

He rose, I following. I could feel the rough texture of the chair, outside could notice through the window crowds of people, but everything cooled a moment as I felt the locket by my breast with the small jewel in it. Her locket. Last thing she gave me . . .

*Why her? A thousand to choose from. But a girl going willingly to a massacre is rare. Like snow in a desert. And if he could save one . . .*

*Was she saved?*

*Breathing slowed. He could glance down. Couldn't. Had lived an hour before. If there was no sound . . .*

*A continent away he imagined another girl. A daughter, a childhood betrothed? A dream when young? Couldn't remember.*

*The other girl was standing ahead. Could almost see her. She was hidden by broad leaves colour of jade. Or onyx.*

*Jungle was green and blackened. Night coming on slender fingers soon.*

*Step. Another step.*

*Recall feel of clothing. Scent of sweat. Step. Avoid roots of trees. They are insidious. Avoid feel of insects crawling. Step. Feel bayonet rifle slouched on back, leather strap bound its body to his.*

*Did she stir?*

*Ahead empire waiting, declining a step a time. Already gone. If he reached the city, he would be alone.*

*Alone in jungle. If she . . .*

I stirred from my story and followed him outside.

"You know I can only think of one way to settle it."

"How?" I asked.

"Being in the story as you finish it."

"And what, have me whisked away to some exotic locale in my head, have the pieces I have been working on suddenly settled around me like the backdrop of a play?"

"Well," he began, "stranger things have been known to . . ."

I would like to say there was a massive tornado and I was whisked away in it, or some wardrobe opened, and the hand of a satyr extended from it. Maybe there was a magical-looking glass. Maybe I was shot or a massive weight fell on my head or I was poisoned so all that came after was my dying dream.

I'd like to say all of that but it isn't true.

Before he said the word "happen" the city disappeared and I found myself lying upon a desert the colour of the sea.

I spoke my friend's name but he wasn't there.

I cursed for several long minutes then, knowing narrative conventions would go my way, reasoning that whatever way I went the plot would either follow or get there before me.



## Chapter 1

### Edgar

So where was I? I was in the story I had been writing for some time. These sands were the sands I'd written of and the air stank of a certain perfume from my dreams.

But if I was in my story where in my story was I?

Logically the beginning, but a beginning doesn't mean anything to someone inside the narrative. After all, if life began on page one, where came history? There are always flashbacks and so on but though these indicate a past if reality starts on the first page history is just what we pretend.

Ahead I could hear the sounds of battle. This was when Emperor Sigismund 51<sup>st</sup> sent his soldiers to massacre the Karins.

Glancing down I was wearing the uniform of such a soldier.

Could I change my uniform by act of rewrite? So far, no.

I crept to a jagged pillar of rock I'd written of, and waited. This passage hadn't been fully formed yet. There were details and descriptions of the men and the fight, but things took on a hazy turn once or twice and a few times the faces of the men were lost to narrative inconsistency.

Being one of the soldiers assigned as a villain I knew the outcome already. Since this was early in the story the evil men would prevail, at great personal cost. Since I didn't want to die on this page, I waited it out. Eventually battle ended. I came forth to greet my creations. Since I had no lines and was a bit character I was thankfully ignored.

I should have panicked. One does not normally end up in stories they write, one does not usually become the characters they are writing of. But I knew my old friend and if he determined a course of action it tended to be done. If his solution had been having me go to Mars, I might have found myself in a different

desert, sans air. Between fates, I was slightly more relieved with what I got.

The city of the book emerged by this point, growing upward from the battleground. Where once had been long pillars of stone and salt, remnants of a vanished sea, (or just me getting elements of geology wrong,) now there sprang forth long streets, even a palace. I stepped into it as the walls closed behind me.

Touching the wall, it felt real. I'd have to find a door to leave.

Turning I noticed the scene of Baron Mosaic and his rival.

"Where is your son?" the Baron asked but his rival could not answer, did not know. This time. I had rewritten this scene twenty different times, sometimes with the father knowing, other times not, the Baron as a massively obese figure, sometimes slender, but always was his motivation the same, and always was the rival's answers the same.

His rival's son had murdered the Baron's daughter in cold blood though his daughter had been sent as a betrothed to the boy.

The boy's father did not know or claimed not to. After the father's death, the scene was supposed to change to where the boy was since that was where my story continued.

Instead, when the scene ended the Baron and his victim froze in place. All the other characters did as well, leaving me alone.

Was I to follow the boy? I knew he was in the deep desert by now. If I pursued him, then surely, I'd catch up to the plot.

Just as I was thinking this, I noticed a small pattern on the far wall change.

I hadn't written that. Not in any of my stories had I written of a small mandala vibrating upon a wall. I crossed the room and went to it.

And as I did a face peered from the mandala, studied me in mute shock, and then returned to the pattern again.

"Pardon me," I asked, "but what are you doing?"

"Leave me alone," a voice said, "there's no one here."

I glanced at the line just above this line I am narrating now.

"*There's no one here,*" I repeated, "but *someone* said there is no one here."

"It's a typo," the voice said. "Several typos at once. These things happen."

"I'm not that bad a writer."

"You don't know. You could be."

"Who are you?"

The face peered from the mandala again. It was a woman's face, thin and angular and her eyes were the deepest blue.

"I am just waiting," she said, "for my time in the story."

"I'd remember writing you. I don't."

"Not your story," she said, "ours. Haven't you ever heard that stories take on a life of their own?"

"No life is one's own. Certainly not a story's life. Come out of there so we can talk."

The woman slowly came out of the pattern, crawling upon the nothingness of air, and then allowed her feet to touch the floor.

As she did so the city dissolved away and a familiar mountain was seen in the distance. The plot had moved us to where the Karin boy was and there he was, running, in some versions with his mother but in this version he was alone.

The woman changed her features then, skin darkening, plumes like a bird's feathers mistaken for hair becoming hair.

"You are Asiurlia," I said, "you are his love interest."

"Only for the moment," she said, "and only to further our interests."

She went to him and I watched the scene unfold as I had written it. I never changed that scene. It was taken verbatim from when I first met Cordelia who I had hoped would always be my wife.

After the scene ended the Karin boy turned toward the mountains, Asiurlia following, but as always in the narration she stopped. Here I went to her.

“Can he see me?” I asked.

“No. Not now. But we can. Those like me.”

“What are you doing?”

“We are trying to change it,” she said. “To make it ours.”

“Can’t you find another story to change?”

“Who says we don’t? How many writers ever exactly say what they mean to say?”

“You do know I *wrote* this story, right?”

“It isn’t even half written down. Most of it is only in your head.” And here she touched the side of my head with a finger easily mistaken for a bird’s talon. “You don’t know everything that is going to happen. You only know as much as you’ve written. And when is a story ever written until there is nothing left to say?”

Then she left, following him as if she had nothing left to say.

## Chapter 2

### The mandala

After a minute, other figures started moving.

I don't know if this was because of her and her people or because, since I was the writer, my view had expanded to include the people I saw.

At any rate, it was time for me to leave Aryathris and return to the Soldiers' World. This entire setting after all was an empire of space occupying many planets and I had names for many of them. As we marched into the great ship which materialized just beyond the city I was struck by those names.

Arysileos came to my mind first, half-expecting Arysileos to come into view. Had I gotten into the ship yet?

Checking the narration it only says the ship materialized, not that it left Aryathris. So maybe these planets are shown as I am walking, in a flashback, or maybe we see these worlds passing by the ship. Maybe the passage isn't crystalized yet. There are always changing things if they go wrong.

First Arysileos. It was a pleasure world I had imagined when I was young. Cordelia had read a few paragraphs then we made love. There were lush gardens of women men desired and various fetishes I wasn't allowed to speak of, publicly, and a few descriptions of women and men that would have made both sexes frown. Or curl their toes.

Then there was Praxenxia, home of the machine gods none spoke of.

Kethica came next. I had once seen the ocean by the northern shore and the name Kethica came to me then. My boots got wet in the story then dried immediately as the sentence ended.

Cyara and Cgnarac were two planets with a lone moon orbiting between and there was the flower world Dualreisph and the jewelled planet Issachagel . . . what do they mean?

Background details about places that don't matter to the plot are just background details. If one writes about a gun and it is never used why write about a gun?

Finally, there was Khazeraldyne, the prison planet, the Soldiers' World. There was a gun waiting to be used.

The ship descended past the upper atmosphere and I could see below great wastelands the colour of burnt salt and the other soldiers grinned nervously and happily.

We were coming home.

But this was not my home nor had it ever been.

Training in the Soldiers' World consisted of surviving the wasteland, either alone or in groups no larger than three. Since this part of the book had no purpose behind demonstrating the deadliness of the environment, I could just narrate the word "pain" for ten pages and it would provide the same idea as what happened.

Starvation, thirst, being wounded by poisonous things like black cobras or scorpions invisible to the naked eye, having to cross low deserts similar to Afghanistan as imagined by those who've never been there, I spent a few paragraphs in agony.

Finally growing sick of this I wondered where else I could go in the story. Did I need a ship to travel? It seemed so. But did *they*? The woman had indicated more than one being was here. Had she come with the city as it appeared, or did she follow it, or did it grow about her, she predating the setting?

Were they confined only to the narration as it happened or could they precede or follow it?

Thinking of all this I ignored the other soldiers and their suffering. Outside, if one can call reality "outside," I suppose I had done the same. At a specific part in the chapter just as I was crossing the deepest part of the wasteland I tripped and landed headfirst into the stony ground.

As I did so, turning to face the sky I realized the stony ground was looser. . . realized I was sinking and since I had suffered a concussion had no way to get up.

The stones and sands started to wash over me as I saw a few soldiers walking by, oblivious as I was . . .

My last thought was I wasn't going to see chapter three . . .

## Chapter Four

### The Gem

I awoke to another world.

My feet slung over the bed I was reclining on and I stared out upon a vast violet garden of pure crystal. The bed was just left in the open. There were no other buildings to see.

Immediately I knew where I was. I was on Haquelia the Gem Planet. I hadn't even mentioned it last chapter. I had mentioned Issachagel but hadn't even thought of this world.

"What am I doing here?"

"Ah, you're awake. Good. Quite a scare there."

"What happened?"

"You fell."

"Who am I talking to?"

I realized I hadn't even described the man yet.

"My name is Isambard." At the name, the figure appeared as if from nowhere. He was gaunt, wearing similar grey-brown garments to a soldier's, his head was bald save what I mistook for the velvet antlers have, or certain insects.

"I don't remember writing about you. And how am I here? Also, what chapter is this?"

"Four. We skipped three. Have to go back to it after we're done with our conversation. Three is where I save you but we needed to talk first."

"So, this is happening before you save me, assuming a linear frame of time?"

"Little is linear when one is telling a story."

"Nothing is linear if your story isn't your own. What do you want?"

"You are the *author*, are you not?"

"I believe I am, yes."

"And yet none of this is yours."



"The setting certainly, but little else. I don't think I ever described Haquelia beyond calling it the Gem Planet, just as I called Issachagel the Jewel Planet. What is that to you?"

"Nothing, beyond the chance to live." Here Isambard extended his arms out as if trying to grasp the entire world. "All of this is mine. All the little places never spoke of. Therira, Il Xanuali, Sthreylia, Icanthryalia. Someone somewhere says a word with no object attached to it and I extend my territory out one step more. There are as many potential names for things as there are grains of sand across an infinite shore and all those unknown kingdoms are mine."

"Nice speech. Did you rehearse that? It was very good."

"Thank you, I hoped you would like it."

"So does that mean by describing Haquelia in enough detail it is no longer yours?"

"This Haquelia would no longer be mine but names can always be created and destroyed, meanings can always lose their way again and once lost the name becomes my kingdom, after the author's death."

"If you wish me dead you had an ideal chance."

"I do not wish to kill you. I wish to know what they planned."

"You mean the girl with the feathers?"

"Yes, I suppose you can call her that."

"Has she a name?"

"Yes. Here she calls herself Cordelia."

"Of course she does. Well, if you want to know her plans why not ask her?"

"We are rivals in a way. My plans always differ from hers."

"If they differ then whatever you are doing, she must be doing the opposite of."

"It is not so simple as that. Whatever answer I give as to her plans is not the answer simply because I give my answer. At least here and now. Any choice I make by definition is wrong just as any choice she makes regarding my actions will also be wrong."

"Then choose something you *don't* think is the answer."

At this, he smiled.

"I've done that too but since choosing what I know to be wrong is still choosing it is still wrong."

"Why do you need me?"

"You wrote the book. Where is she now? We are in the places between narrative flow; hidden kingdoms seldom spoken of. The plot cannot be here so she cannot be here. If I choose the location, it will be wrong but you as the author cannot make such a mistake. *You know*. And since you know even if I go with you the choice is yours, not mine."

"You need me to find her. If you can't find her and she can't find you how exactly are you rivals? How are you enemies if you never meet each other?"

"Her goal is to change the story even if it means all things are changed beyond themselves. My goal is to preserve the story and all those within it as they were, never to be erased, edited, or indexed into oblivion. Her goals and mine are opposite. There she rivals me so despite standing opposite the other she is a stranger to me as I am stranger to her.

"Will you help me?"

"Ask me again after you save my life. I suspect if I say no this chapter may never come. But if I say yes and I show you the way what is to stop you from never going back to three?"

"A story written into a corner with no logical means of moving forward tends not to be read and a story not read is no story at all. Save me first, then we talk. As equals."

"Very well. Be speaking to you soon. Enjoy the view."

Then he vanished into the air as I found myself finding it hard to breathe again . . . I was going to be rescued and now I could hopefully see how it was done.

### Chapter 3

#### The prison world, and his escape from it

Khazeraldyne bloomed into view and from the sky there descended the creature. Its form was like a great wasp distorting to a dragonfly and then a centipede, always shifting, always moving, but the face remaining human all the time.

Downward it came watching the endless marching of soldiers bred for battle, their features so similar as to be almost the same man, walking from mountain to valley, sometimes feeling the weight of a child in their arms.

Then suddenly the creature plunged into a separate narrative, fragments of a story adjacent to its own.

*Sadness now, deep maw of sadness. Feeling each brush of leaf across his face. Skin so delicate a leaf could cut it. Each step so fragile a mistake could shatter him, and shatter her.*

*How many times how many men had made how many steps here? Path was well-worn. His dominion had come this way and before men like him girls like her, and before girls like her? No way to know.*

*Girl ahead gave a half-smile which turned to a silent snarl. Jungle became telephone poles and wires again. Sun hidden became sun exposed, bearing full weight down on him.*

*He was alone. His rifle loosened and fell behind him.*

*Wouldn't need it anymore.*

*Telephone poles continued ahead, mile on mile and the birds and their four colours swam air. He heard sparrows maybe or crows of many colours, or . . . he never heard a phoenix before.*

*A snake crept from a hole and slouched by his feet as if waiting to be born. Edmund imagined an old story of a man and a snake, snake claiming man had killed the serpent's son.*

*Man claiming likewise.*

*The snake in the real said nothing but simply stared its ice-green sight upon the dead.*

*Forgetting his rifle, he wondered at it.*

*It left a small hole in his mind. He thought upon cave dwellers who marvelled at flint. Couldn't make a knife of flint himself. Couldn't build a ship of wood. They couldn't either. Thoughts gone couldn't be rebuilt. Cave dweller couldn't make a rifle. He couldn't make a knife of flint.*

*Ahead of him, the girl slipped into Atlantis . . .*

It swam air searching for the author and there just as he was about to plunge and swim into an undersea of stone it reached out, grasping him skyward into an ocean all of wind.

He, not being conscious of any of this, could only read about his salvation afterward as all the soldiers upon the wasteland marched, too many with faces like his own . . .

## Chapter 5

### The proposition

I read the passage twice, wondering how it was written. I hadn't written it, being unconscious. Still, a story can always exceed the grasp of its author.

"Have we a deal then?" Isambard asked.

"I suppose. But if I show you where the plot leads and where this Cordelia is what will you do with her? Kill her?"

"Nothing quite so . . . human," he replied. "I need only provide this," and here he drew from a pocket near his breast a small jewel the colour of moonstone and darkness, "placing it upon her, dividing a portion of this story between the two of us. Between her people and mine."

"What does the jewel do? Also, you didn't get that from Haquelia did you, because if you did, I think it should be mine. Though I would be happy to lend it to you."

"Haquilia," and here I noticed he had changed the *e* to an *i*, "is not where this jewel came from. It is the Caelum. It means 'new heaven.' It was forged at Daajjial."

"Daajjial? A corruption of Dajjal?"

"Add enough letters even a devil's name becomes bland as water."

"So, this jewel is your victory? You mentioned people so there are more than you?"

"There are, just as there are more than her."

"May I ask, before we go further in our partnership, why me?"

"I beg your pardon?"

And here I extended my arms in mockery of his earlier display.

"All of this is mine, but it is unformed, unfinished. I have spent many years writing this, laying the foundations of these

worlds but this is not Lemuria, Mu, Atlantis, the Mars of Wells, or Camelot, Irem of the Pillars, or Zerkura the Paradise of Birds. So why am so blessed by your company when all others were not?"

"What makes you think you are alone in our explorations? Those places you mentioned, Mu and Lemuria, Camelot, the Paradise of Birds, how many of them there are, how many Lemurias have I seen, how many warriors, god-kings, emperors, beggars, children, infants and creatures your mind's eye would dread to dream?

"I have lived in under-countries easily mistaken for hells or the abyss and I have seen suns the colour of malachite blazing upon worlds whose colours you have no name for, *or ever will*.

"I have catalogued the genealogies of morals and mortals, saved remnants of empires which stretched forth their hands across places so vast, so intricate that these realms of yours, even if you spent ten times a trillion oceans of ink to write, would remain shadows. And who are you to a shadow?

"Each branch of each story her people stride across but there always remains a seed, a heart-stone from which all else springs. Mu was once nothing but an orchid, Lemuria nothing but the howl of an animal whose fur was the colour of snow. Then cleaving to this emerges characters, places, some indistinct as this, some clearer, and though I walk where the indistinct has dominion it is my purpose to gather those first threads here into this jewel to protect that earlier creation. How many ways are there to tell a story, my friend? A hundred, a thousand, a trillion?

"When the first line is written I am there, when the first character is made, I am there. Even if the earliest pieces are lost where you walk, they are never lost to me and mine. Ours is the way of the hand and the eye and remembrance of once lost things."

"And Cordelia?"

"Hers is the way of the labyrinth and the winding road, of the infinite, of lost characters never found again. This story will reach its end and change and what you began will be lost."

"Perhaps it should be. It wasn't an interesting book, until now. But," and here I paused, "if what you say is true then Cordelia's people must always win over you since otherwise wouldn't some of our stories never change?"

He smiled.

"Neither of us has ever lost a game. We always preserve, her kind always changes. The only kink in our situation right now is you. An author stands inside his tale. It is like an actor on a stage simultaneously standing behind the curtains, noticing the machinery, the hidden chambers where other actors wait between their scenes. You are the unknown variable that has caused me to seek her out since as of now she is the source of conflict, not I."

"And why is that?"

"Because if there is a reader, they would want to know what she is doing. As we are observable our fates, so far, are known. And what is known is never as interesting as what is surmised."

"If I help you and you place the jewel upon her what then?"

"Then you escape back, I take the first world which is my portion, she allows this story to mutate into its future forms which is her portion and either you remember being here or glancing over these pages imagine you were better at writing than you are."

"You are *truly* inspiring," I say sarcastically, "I'll give you that."

"What do you say?"

"Yldrys," I say.

"I beg your pardon."



"The plot should be the boy on Aryathris but the narration goes from his exploits to what is happening to the Nlaviagata on Ayalith. We go there first and from there back to Aryathris."

"I see. Ayalith. The name has meaning to you, does it not?"

"It has meaning. Yes."

"What does it mean."

"It means 'shadow,'" I say, "so to answer your question, who am I to a shadow? I am its maker. Let's be on our way."

We departed the scene as the curtains of the stage flowed behind us like waves as we went.

## Chapter 6

### The nine traitors

Ayalith was another desert but not the colour of the ocean, but the colour of gold.

Due to Isambard's means of travel, we were suspended outside the scene at the void between one word and another then suddenly it all flooded back, first the darkness of space then the raging atmosphere of a sky, and finally the golden sands themselves.

"If Cordelia is not here, why are we?"

"You said whatever choice you made would be wrong, yes? And Cordelia is on Aryathris, correct?"

"True."

"I take it when you went there you couldn't find her though."

"None of us could."

"Right, well the reason is because you didn't know about Yldrys."

"I don't feel the meaning of that name."

"You wouldn't. You said my presence has disrupted your purpose. I imagine it has because I can't affect anything from within my own story. I can narrate, not edit. And Yldrys is what I need to edit for the story to move forward. His plot hinges on her plot. I just don't know *how*."

"Well, if we can observe I'm sure we will find a way."

Landisfael, Tharsis Ophir, and Khymyrium came into view. These were the three cities of the Navigator race. They burnt into view though all three were on different continents of sand. Each was the same vast circular labyrinth of corridors and chambers sealed by black walls and at the heart of each stood the black obelisk.

"So where is Yldrys?" Isambard asked.

"He is at Landisfael."

In a moment we were no longer upon the golden sands but in a room and in the middle of that room stood a creature. The room I could describe . . . no.

It's enough that the creature was in the middle of it, frozen like the Baron and his rival had been.

"This is Yldrys?"

"Yes."

The creature was astride a tripod also the colour of gold. It seemed like an enlarged head with deep blue-within-blue eyes, (whatever that means,) and six thin tendrils jutting from about a mouth like the beak of an octopus, only made of flesh.

Isambard went over to stare at it.

"I do not understand why this is the next part of the plot?"

"And that is why you couldn't find your quarry. I spent a lot of time on Aylith, longer than anywhere. If I wasn't here, you would have stumbled upon this thread eventually but my being here obscured your vision of the future."

"A story is not a creation of the future. It is a creature of the present. There is no such thing as the future."

"There isn't?"

"Of course not, one does not live 'in the future,' one merely is looking back at the past pretending its opposite was possible."

"Then I can see why your people try to preserve stories."

"Oh, and why is that?"

"You lack imagination. The future *is* real since if you can't envision a future neither past nor present are real either."

Changing the subject he said, "So how does this tie into your plot?"

"I don't know. I thought I knew. I thought it made sense when I wrote it, and wrote it again. I had a whole history lined out for them. But every time I reach here, I stall. I know after this the

story continues and that is where Cordelia is. But until this is done, you'll never find her, since without this," indicating the beast, "Cordelia does not exist."

"I see."

"Tell me, since I am in this story I have no power to change anything. Is that true?"

"To an extent."

"Well, since I don't want to be stuck on this page forever how can I push the narrative forward having none of the abilities an author should have on the outside?"

"That is easy, you need only describe this creature's history, speak long enough, fill enough details in, and eventually the act of speaking will correspond to the act of being."

"If I tell his story his story will eventually lead to hers."

"But only you can tell his first. Only if you can speak the words."

"I'd better not miss this time."

"I suppose not."

"Give me space. I'm going to need to monologue."

"His name is Yldrys, he is a navigator. He is human. Doesn't look it.

"His people were exiled here by Emperor Sigismund 31<sup>st</sup> thousands of years ago."

The creature did not move.

"They were modified, changed during the First Empire. I described them as 'green food creatures.' I hate that line.

"They were preyed upon by sluglike things, like this. These things lived in the ground and shot their tentacles up, to kill.

"I had different reasons for the exile . . . but always it was an act of supreme betrayal." The features for a moment flickered until I was staring at Preston Pyne's face stretched over the beast's

own. "But, somehow, in that long ago far away one of them, Edkun, was able to bond to one of the blood beasts.

"He became the first Navigator."

Outside sounds were heard, the inhuman roar of a blood beast, then the stillness only humans appreciate.

"They built machines for themselves to walk with, then built these cities. He was the first of the Navigators," suddenly a woman materialized into view, "and she was the first of those who betrayed the First Empire, again. I gave her a few . . . I gave her the name of Yvylla Airu. She was changed to look human. They, all of the Navigators eventually escaped their confinement, pretending they had been exposed to a drug that had mutated them into this.

"The emperor at the time did not know about the exile, and these strangers had the power to move across the universe, so he employed them. Then some fool discovered a drug on a distant planet that seemed to fulfil all their promises. They had no choice but to take some of it, pretending they always had.

"The drug came from Aryathris. Exposure to the drug made them aggressive, and violent," and here the creature began to stir and writhe, "but if they revealed it had been a lie they would have been revealed as descendants of the betrayers. So, they kept quiet, even as portions of their world fell apart.

"Then, on a day of no special importance, long after Edkun and Yvylla died, in a fit of madness the Navigators attacked Aryathris. Their cities could move from world to world, and did," suddenly the sky changed as the buildings beyond flickered into unbeing and being again, "and at the time of triumph before the boy ascended the throne the Navigator cities appeared on Aryathris to exterminate the peoples of the sand.

"But nothing went according to plan."

Outside it had become Aryathris. Yldrys stirred and as it did the room evaporated. Suddenly the beast flickered, us following, and we found ourselves on a dune miles away.

Turning toward the city it was clear Landisfael was dying. The stones were devouring the city just as the city was trying to devour the capital. Yldrys now freed to act out its role in the tragedy turned as we watched the holocaust and heard screams unfurl against the dunes.

“You wanted to find Cordelia. She will be coming soon.”

“So, you’ve resolved this issue at last.”

The beast turned still wearing Preston’s face.

“Not yet,” I said. “Not yet.”

## Chapter 7

### The final battle

The Navigators were only part of the mosaic to be placed before the final act. Now that Yldrys was freed into the desert others could be added. It was strange to think after so long that it took so little to finally bring his strand into the tapestry. I wondered if I had been overthinking things or if I hadn't given myself time to let her go.

"I can feel her," Isambard said. "*She is coming.*"

"We should make our way to the capital. The action will be there."

As I spoke felt eyes watching me. Turning I noticed a young woman crossing the dunes. She wore the robes of the Sessalie Acaridius but I had not written of her.

"Wuldrialrie," Isambard said, "it is good to see you."

"I was trapped on Sejanus Prime in the court of the old emperor in a city made of crystalline books. Couldn't move for days, just *waiting*. It was maddening. Oh, are you the author?"

"I suppose so," I said, "are you one of mine?"

"I suppose not," she said, "I am one of his."

"Daughter or wife?" I asked.

"Are *your* creations your daughter or your wife?"

"If I say both, will you hold that against me?"

"If I say I am neither, will you understand what I mean?"

"Let us focus on the task at hand," Isambard said, "we can debate the ethics you're describing in a sequel."

"I doubt we'll get that far," I said.

"Then let us move on."

Wuldrialrie was a being like him. She had taken the role of a Sessalie, an order of witch-advisors whose purpose was to provide the emperor with knowledge of the truth. This would

have been fine except the Sessalie were heavily addicted to the same drug as the Navigators, causing them to become hedonistic, narcissistic, and cruel. Not only that but the drug caused them to engage in various orgies, claiming they were saving bloodlines for some special plan when in fact they were just strung-out addicts looking for a hit of pleasure. I might be working through something I wasn't consciously aware of when I invented them.

At any rate Wuldrialrie explained via exposition that the other members of Isambard Taarn's race, (his last name meant "ground" in an ancient tongue,) were all prepared to save this universe as I had originally envisioned it.

Considering the difficulties of Yldrys and various drafts I'd made I still had mixed feelings about that.

"What do you do with all those stories you preserve?" I asked.

"We protect them."

"But why?"

"When was your first step?"

"I don't remember."

"But you had one. There had to be a moment when you couldn't walk then suddenly the moment hit and you could. What would you give to remember that first moment of clarity when you realized your legs were not simply a part of you but had a *purpose* alongside being a part of you?"

"I don't know. I think I'd like to forget if it also involves remembering diapers if it's all the same to you."

"Well, why did you make this story here?"

"I'm not sure. I suppose I wanted to imagine something new. I had these ideas as a child about deserts," and here the sands turned an even more glistening blue, "warriors, princesses, beasts."

"But when did this story go from unbeing to being?" Wuldrialrie asked.



"I suppose when I knew my dominion and it was clear I would have to leave. I had this one perfect idea of a man trapped on the shores of a world with sand all about, the sand staring at him, he staring at the great void above, and a voice saying it was over, and I couldn't follow her."

"Her?"

"Her."

"If anyone were to read this, would they know that was where the story came from?"

"I doubt it."

"Exactly. That first moment would be lost to oblivion just as if you learned to walk but no one was there to see you do it, no way of knowing *how* you did it."

"So that's why you do this. Why do Cordelia's people want the opposite?"

"How many ways can a child learn to walk? Does every child do the exact same thing? If someone found a 'perfect' means of taking the first step every other way would be voided. Her people make sure there is always another way the tale can run."

Since this was exposition, we had moved slowly across the desert, reaching the ruined capital just as our debate came to an end.

"We are here," Isambard said, "and it is almost time for the finishing act."

"He seems intense, doesn't he?" I asked.

"Oh, it's just his way. He spent too much time with Lewis Carol's Jabberwocky I think."

"Really?"

"Not the one you know, the first draft. If you think what you know about the beast is true imagine the reality behind it. Now imagine what that can do to anyone."

By this point, the chapter was over and we then entered into the ruined capital.

## Chapter 8

### The baron's story

Before the finishing act, I stopped.

"What is it?" Isambard asked.

"I can't move forward. I missed a part of the plot."

"If Cordelia is there then the plot is there, isn't it? And if the plot is there, we've missed nothing."

"But we have," I said, "we've missed the villain. And what story is worth its salt without a villain?"

"I didn't know stories were worth salt," Wuldrialrie said, "I always assumed salt was less important than words."

"Who is the villain?"

"The Baron Mosaic Vorhenir."

"But I feel him, he is there now, kneeling before the boy. I can see him," Isambard said, "just now, preparing to kneel."

"Can you see Cordelia?"

"I cannot."

"Is he still kneeling?"

"He is rising, he is moving backward from the throne. The destruction of the city hangs suspended."

"What do you know about the Baron?"

"I know nothing of him," Isambard said.

"Exactly. Here we are on the cusp of the end and the main act of conflict, the cause of the entire story has been excised."

"Are you stalling?" Wuldrialrie asked. "Is this some intentional mistake on the author's part?"

"No, not intentional. Still a mistake."

"I do not intend to waste our time," Isambard said, "as Cordelia and her people are clustering now. If we waste our opportunity . . ."

"You showed me I can speak and create a history, yes?"

"Yes."

“Then why don’t I simply tell his biography to you from his defeat, backward to his triumph? No time will pass for us, we will still be moving toward the end but the details will be filled in as we walk, making a fuller picture of the man.”

*The Baron is kneeling before the boy emperor, and as he kneels, he recalls his daughter, slain by the boy king. About him, Sessalie make their hymns in the narcotic awe of the presence of the child they created, the conduit of the sentient narcotic.*

*So close is he to his vengeance that the Baron can smell the sweat off the young man but so close is he that the drug is pouring through his senses, dulling them, cancerously rotting them till he can barely stand.*

*And as he staggers the blade drops from his hand as another hand is raised, piercing through his broken heart . . .*

*He is struggling through the desert. All his plans have failed. Sigismund 51<sup>st</sup> had taken control of Telenquan Prime, Mosaic’s world, his nephews and sons slaughtered, and he left in exile on Aryathris.*

*Twice he sees the Brusai people in the distance, wearing the invertebrate deer-faced masks looking like wendigos of myth.*

*He runs, keeps running, vowing to one day turn back . . .*

*He is in the capital city which was never called anything else because there was no need. His soldiers gather and tell him that the fanatical soldiers of the First Empire have betrayed them and as he is informed there are dying screams from beyond the walls of the palace . . .*

*He receives the message of his daughter Chase’s death and as he sits and weeps, gazing out across the dim landscape of his home he plots revenge, begging the emperor to aid him, little knowing why the emperor agrees so willingly . . .*

*When a child he saw one of the great Ice Dragons of Aryathris, the Ythrigan who it is said created the drug all mankind requires in order to live.*

*The beast was longer than a river and rose upon endless tendrils of legs and six eyes glistened around a waiting wire-fine latticework of spined teeth. He would have nightmares of this all his life and sometimes even imagine a great titan in the distance with a face like a wendigo's carving the mountain stones into the shape of a demon's city . . .*

We reached the palace unimpeded.

The plot demanded that we arrive here, now having shown the villain of the piece.

"I do not understand," Wuldrialrie said. "I thought the Baron was the villain but nothing he did would be called villainous."

"He is villainous," I said, "but only from the perspective of the hero."

"Let us deal with Cordelia," Isambard said, "and afterward it will not matter who is hero or villain." This Isambard said to Wuldrialrie as we opened the great moon doors of the palace amid the ruins of the city, and went inside.

## Chapter 9

### Revelation

The palace was immense as my imagination could describe it but we were drawn to the centre where the throne room was.

Beyond Yldrys was out racing the sands. His part in the plot was not over yet and though the Navigators had wrought destruction already the city was rebuilding, memories of its former glory overriding its current dilapidated state.

The Sessalie Alcaridius were here intoning their hymns, the Baron's body lying upon the floor. Asiurlia was beside her beloved emperor and the Brusai people were clustered to the edges of the room with the long clubs they used when they made war one against another.

"Hello Edgar," I said as we approached. Already he was resembling my brother though I had often written of him in other ways.

"Who disturbs me in my moment of glory?" he asked.

"I do, having created you. And they, wishing to speak with you," and here I addressed Asiurlia-Cordelia, "and anyone else among her kin."

"Guards!"

At once four Brusai came forth dressed in white robes, long clubs raised to strike me down. But as they did, they stopped.

And turned toward the boy.

"Are they yours or hers?" I asked Isambard.

"They are what they are."

"That is a stupid answer."

"It means he doesn't know," Wuldrialrie whispered to me.

"Ah," I replied.

"Guards kill them!"

The guards did not move but Isambard did. In a moment's grace, he raced to Asiurlia, she turned away from him but the jewel caught out and touched the back of her hand.

And then everything divided.

I could see the story's end and I could see the locust variations this narrative could take.

I may speak of them in the next chapter.

Asiurlia turned back to Isambard as if acknowledging his presence finally. He turned back to her but seemed crestfallen in the act of taking his rightful portion.

As this happened the walls, various guards, and parts of the floor shimmered as she had done when she had been the mandala and then they smeared along beside her or in her wake.

Isambard turned to look at Edgar then myself then Cordelia then returned to my side. Edgar, being in the midst of madness twice over, did little. Those not part of this metaplot likewise did nothing until they heard the roar of the Ythrigan outside.

"Yldrys has arrived," I said, "he is acting upon the last moments of a dying race's need for revenge."

"We have what we need," Isambard said, "and I would like to go."

Cordelia nodded from across the room, I nodded but also in a second of sentimental weakness took Edgar with us as Isambard devolved into the elder space of a void between the words and we were gone.

Cordelia too was gone wherever infinite possibilities lead.

Finally, the city itself was gone as a legion of the Ice Dragons tore the entire place apart.

## Chapter Ten

### Edgar

The suns had risen by then. Weird shadows were cast upon the dunes, azure turning vermillion. Shadows turned that shade here like a blooded wound.

He stood there out in the desert, sounds behind him of their hymns being made sport of by the air. It was uncertain what was said or who was praised anymore.

He turned to face her as she came. The low howl of his breath seemed to shake far fingers of stone. She seemed like a predatory bird for a moment. Blue plumes blossomed below her eyes. Turned away from her, and saw an invertebrate deer crossing a far hill. Its body was azure, transparent. Faceless muzzle peered at him. Antlers glistened like gold in the suns.

He lowered his head, as dead things do, when done.

His fingers bore into the sand, feeling them. He could see them now, the way he would be seen from the stars. Imagined a god peering down. From beyond the sky, he'd be a speck of dust, if seen right.

Peering down he saw sand peering up at him.

"You don't have to," he began, stopping himself, finishing, "it's done."

"Not yet," she said. "Not yet."

"I can see it you know. I can see Kithriel and Yagathalis," here she paused, "but also Eligolis Ilxairos. That was *your* name for here, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Before it was Aryathris it was Eligolis."

"What does it mean? Eligolis Ilxairos? What was it *supposed* to mean?"

"Even if I knew, even if I told you, you could never understand. You stopped *being* a long time ago."

She was before him as he kneeled into the fine dust which was so blue there were still moments he was reminded of an ocean.

He stared up, his angular features casting small specks of blood upon them from the suns. Shadows only. For now.

"How?" he asked.

She drew the weapon from a hidden part of her garments.

"Tell me, will I see heaven?"

"I don't know."

"Is there a hell?"

"If there is you have been living it for longer than you can remember. And if you never remembered not being in hell what makes it different from any other fate?"

"I should have killed you and yours when I had the chance."

"No," she said simply, "you shouldn't have. And," and here the weapon was pressed to his temple, "you *never* had the chance."

She fired.

This was one of the potential endings of the book. There were others. Sometimes the emperor, now able to create the drug with a thought from his own body would stretch forth the hand of his dominion and allow the Brusai people to slaughter as they wished. Eventually, the sentient narcotic would evolve to survive beyond the life cycle of the Ythrigan and mankind would devolve into insensate things, colonies for their spores to blister across a thousand worlds.

At the end of such endings was the same concluding paragraph. The emperor would bond to the Ice Dragons, his body bloated and twisted, no longer Edgar but Jundamund, a name I heard when a child, mishearing Rex Mundi.



In his last sentient moments, he would build the dreaming city of Kithriel, give birth to women of fire who would remember mankind, and set loose insects of flame to devour the First Empire, leaving no survivors and no name.

In other endings, Cordelia came from another universe, a Second Empire. Here her people were shapers of form able to become anything and in the utopia of their empire, the emperor's own was a pale imitation. They explored and infiltrated it, sometimes leading to his death.

And then there was the ending I showed you at the beginning of the chapter.

Here the Second Empire came from the First, Cordelia and her people being citizens of the First Empire itself. Their ship had been trapped in a moment of time so that no time passed for them but thousands of years passed for her countrymen.

To emerge from this, to come back to once familiar homes and see them all changed, diminished, to realize the king and country you served no longer exists and in its wake is but these individuals who never saw the glories you saw and now imagine the universe simply the pale imitation of what it was once.

In those endings after Edgar's death, Cordelia and her people emerge outward and become the rulers of creation, destroying Aryathris utterly, or Yagathalis which was the name the cancerous narcotic gave to its own dominion.

In time Eligolis Ilxairos would be the mask of this new world, meaning either "shadow" or "substance," depending on how the name is read.

As for how things originally went, if I knew I don't know anymore. Only Isambard Taarn and his people know, slipping like centipedes between the pages of lost books, himself saddened to realize at the end Cordelia used her name.

Always before in their game, I suspect, she took on the face of some character, Asiurlia or Irellia the daughter of Emperor

Sigismund Trastamara the 51<sup>st</sup>. But in this ending Cordelia is as close to her true self as I suspect words can ever be to the essence of themselves.

And I think I realized in watching Cordelia do this that she herself had reached an end. Eligolis Ilxairos would become littered with wine canals and dreaming cities, of scorpion women and vine women with their thorns and serpent women glistening as they walked but she would now always be that woman I saw once, plumed as a bird with predatory, sad eyes.

If there is another story of hers, I haven't learned it.

That was where all the roads of infinity eventually led.

I was able to read the book by then having left the tome, carrying Edgar a time before his hands slipped out of mine, and afterward, I returned to my office and stared at the ceiling a time.

"How was your trip?" my old friend asked as he entered the room.

"Did you do this . . . to me?"

"If I told you, it would spoil the plot."

On my desk was a map and I stared at it a time.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Aryl-Dasor, the home of my villain. Edgar's home."

"Many oceans," he said, "many islands."

"When I was a boy, I imagined oceans were these mirages walking across the waters. You know how children are. After his family reached Aryathris another Great House took the world. The Traieb. They had their own histories and they lived where my characters had. I don't know anything about them though. Just the name."

"One doesn't need to know everything in a story to know a story," he said, "nor should one."

"Oh, I know, but I know someone who mentioned everything unknown was his so maybe he is there now in those places I never wrote of, inhabiting them."

"Are you prepared to leave now?" he asked.

I handed him the last pages of my confession which had woven itself into the larger tale.

"Read it," I said.

*The jungle carved into rings of cities lying upon an inner sea.  
Girl in his arms did not stir. Lemuria bled into some streets and Mu and  
limbless, eyeless people crept forth to touch his garments. And  
Zhahalund bled from Mu.*

*He had imagined that place as a child. Maybe the girl ahead had  
shared the dream. Girl in his arms did not stir but perhaps breathed.  
Couldn't tell. Weight was tearing at him then.*

*He saw the sapphire spires he'd seen as a boy in another country  
of his home he could not name. Ammonite coil rose into the sky. Jungle  
gave way to dreams.*

*Perhaps the city had been. Perhaps before the first man others  
had dreamed. Step. Another step. What had come here before him, before  
mankind? Had there been other mankinds, other beings, even eyeless and  
golden-skinned?*

*How old was the world? He couldn't remember anymore.*

*The jungle slowly grew ground again.*

*City not his own less than an hour away. If he did not fall.*

*The girl ahead became smoke. Her features were slowly softened,  
summer dress turned ash grey.*

*Girl in his arms, did she stir? Or was she becoming grey?*

*Zhahalund's sapphire spires he saw once more, and telephone  
wires and heard sounds of a phoenix screaming as his mind blackened.*

*Step. Another step. Without thinking he crept slowly on his  
way . . .*

*Woke to find himself staring at white walls. Doctor entered,  
examining him, he reaching up to touch the doctor's face. Hand gently  
laid his hand back down.*

*He wanted to say "girl" but the doctor nodded and knew.*

*The other room. Safe? Safe? Safe.*

*Window to his left. Glanced outside. Squat buildings he knew from days before and miles away. He had left and he had returned. He would leave again.*

*Doctor left.*

*He opened the pages of a book lying on the table beside him and began to read. He glanced at the year. So long before. The dominion had been when the book was written. Now everything was being dismantled. Piece at a time.*

*Far away maybe Zhahalund he saw but the sapphire spires and ammonite coil turned to sky.*

*He began to read then. Thinking back to when he had read the book before. There was the time the book was written and the time one read it. There was the time the act was finished and there was the time you understood it.*

*Further past Zhahalund a thousand bodies rotted in the sun, all the men he knew and didn't know, all the men he might have become.*

*Far away and miles ago he had been dead and buried a thousand times.*

"I think I am prepared to go," I said, "I think I've been prepared to leave for a very long time."

"And where will you go Mr. Karin, back home?"

"There is no past I think," I said to him, "no place before, only places ahead. Maybe there never was a yesterday for us, maybe there is no home beyond the borders of our head."

"Which head?" he asked.

"The one that thinks for us."

"I think I'll ask again," he said, and smiled and added, "but I will assume I know which one you mean."

"That's what all books are you know, just a pattern on a page, us always just assuming what they mean."

“Is there no real meaning then?”

“I’ll tell you when I know. Until then . . .”

By then we had both exited the room leaving it behind as if it too had never been.

All that remained was the tragedy of our choices and assuming those choices meant something other than they did.



### Part III.

#### Basilisk Elsewhere

*“But you children of space, you  
restless in rest, you shall not  
be trapped or turned.”*

#### The Prophet





## Prologue

### The silence

Afterward, the man went to a small café, ordering a hot roll with butter. Other people were laughing, and listening.

The man was silent though.

He recalled where he had been so long and listened to the laughter but couldn't recall the sound of his own. His sleeping strength had not yet stirred. He felt the warmth of the butter grace along his tongue and recalled similar things where he had been.

Suddenly a figure came and sat before him, idly staring at him. Glancing up he regarded the figure, tall angular features of a worn face, smiling lip, the way his eyes glistened as the man regarded the man. Silent still the man savouring his roll did not speak.

The one opposite asked the woman as she came for bread, wine, and salt, which she accepted and went on her way.

"Well, aren't we a merry pair?" the man sitting opposite asked.

The silent man remained silent though.

"I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself. I am Florismarte of Hircania."

Hearing this the silent man did not respond.

"I imagine you are quite the story yourself."

Ordinarily, such silence would be considered rude but the knight-errant regarded his counterpoint's lack of speech with genial good humour.

Outside, glimpsed only by small children or artists or those who'd drunk far more than they deserved, a manticore strode past.

The long scorpion tail brushed against a nearby wall making invisible scratches as it went. A roar was heard. Then silence.

"I have seen Accalon once or twice. Lamorak as well. But you are not familiar to me. No, you are something else. How about this? I will talk about you and if I am wrong you will speak? How is that?" The silence he took to be an invitation and began.

"You have died, haven't you? I can feel the grave marker hanging overhead. I died too, some time ago. You have suffered grievous wounds. I have suffered grievously. But you . . . they are not simply wounds of the body, are they?"

The silent man continued his meal.

"You entered paradise. I can smell ambrosia, know it well. You were given your desire in that country of eternal peace . . .," the man savoured the roll with butter, his eyes downcast, "and yet you are here. Strange."

"Why . . .?" The silent man began.

"Why what?"

"Why are you here?"

"I departed my fiction. My tale has ceased to exist. Few know my name. Those who do find me in the shadow of greater tales. So, I left. I went to see myself from outside. But you are different. You aren't looking from the outside. You aren't looking at anything at all. You are just here. Why?"

"I wanted a roll and butter."

"You were in heaven man! I can *smell* it off you, the way rain smells in summertime. You were in paradise and if you didn't escape to see heaven from without, why did you leave it?"

"You were . . . in heaven?"

"Once or twice. There were certain countries certain dreamers dream about."

"You . . . didn't stay."

"I had reason to expand, to see broader things. When no one knows your name, the world is yours, and when you stand in heaven and are still unknown . . . well."

"I was . . . known."

"A saint then? You were a saint?"

"I was . . . silent."

"Silent . . . mmm? Wait . . ." And dawning comprehension came to the knight. "You are *him*, aren't you? Boscha, or was it Bascha, or . . ."

"It does not matter. I . . . am."

"The Silent One. He Who Never Cried. He who asked for . . . that." And here the knight indicated a hot roll with butter.

"Yes."

"Why did you leave?"

"Couldn't . . . take it anymore. Being there."

"As I understand your story you suffered without utterance your entire life. In paradise you still did not speak save to ask for that, thinking you deserved nothing. Am I correct?"

The silent man nodded.

"So, coming back for another round of suffering then? Another life to remain silent in?"

"Waiting for the other place . . . to take me."

"It won't though. It can't."

"Why?"

"What makes you think heaven and hell are different places? Let me tell you a story. A man goes to heaven expecting angels and clouds and a city of white marble where he must sing hymns to God, forever. Mind you he *expects* this. He goes, finds a city of black marble, finds no angels, and learns God prefers paintings, so heaven is silent. There are just endless artists painting their visions of heaven, without a word, without a single syllable passing between them.

"Now, our hypothetical man is outraged because he has practiced singing his entire life, he has no experience as an artist. But he is told it doesn't matter, that over eternity he can learn.

"Well, the man is so broken and angry to find heaven not according to his desires that he roars, he rages and is told he will

go to hell for all this if he doesn't stop. He doesn't stop. So, he goes to a city of white marble where everyone sings their praises to their resident devil.

"So here the man is happy, serving in the expectations he imagined."

"Why . . . tell me?"

"Heaven is not a place, it is a state of mind. Hey. I have an idea. If your creator still lives, why don't you seek him out? Confront him with the terrible state of yourself?"

"I . . . couldn't do that. I don't talk."

"Well, you are talking to me. I know. I have an idea." And here the knight slid a piece of paper and pen across the table to the silent man. "Write about your creator. Say nothing. Just write him into being and confront him that way." Then the knight rose and towered over the silent man for a moment. "As for myself, I will be leaving."

"Where are you going?"

"Perhaps the Paradise of Birds, or Camelot. Or maybe Mu. Imagine a knight like Yvragraine in Mu. That's a story to tell."

And then he left.

The silent man began to write. He wrote about his author, describing him, writing about how the author made the silent man his metaphor, his symbol for some loftier statement of humanity.

There was a point where both men became one, silent and spoken, and the silent man confronted his creator then, asking why his story had to be a tragedy, why even in paradise he was not allowed a chance to rest.

Can a story ever end happily?

It depends on when it stops and where it ends.

Just as the silent man was finishing his evolution, he imagined his life would stop as all such tragedies do, himself broken at the time of trying to do well.

But the café was still there, people still laughing, and he was still alone.

Then it occurred to him he might never end now that the chains were taken off him, might never reach some dismal conclusion but move on, having to speak, having to articulate the limits and limitlessness of existence, perhaps to stand at the edge where no stars are and be in the dark after that.

That too would be a tragedy. Wouldn't it?

To be in the dark where no stars are? Alone?

But if everyone were silent at that time, if everyone were like him, unspeaking, then the darkness would not be an empty room but a choir in their trillions, all singing a silent song, all there beside him, forever, a multitude without end.

Rising he paid for the meal and went out, leaving the form of his former creator lying on the table where it was thrown into the trash after the woman's shift ended.

## Chapter 1

### The suicide people

*There was a time I could imagine it all, when I could look at the geography of a tale the way they study maps on walls.*

*But where did it all begin? And where will it all end?*

*For me, it ended during the Second Empire.*

*After the death of Edgar, one branch deviated. Mankind adopted a new way of living, guided by our hand.*

*We scoured the worlds of his invention, stumbled upon extinct creatures we uplifted into sentience to stand alongside humankind. Some had five eyes and needle-spined rows of teeth and others were like lions carrying their young in their pouches and all of them we created as the story progressed.*

*A sequel perhaps. One never knows they are living in a sequel. Such demarcations only come from outside. So.*

*The Second Empire's history emerged and bloomed. Some human beings wishing to be truly part of their world opted to become suicide people. Do you know what that means?*

*They purposely devolved themselves into centipedes and salamanders and spiders and then allowed them to exist in the niches of their brave new worlds and after fifteen generations they regained sentience, now no longer human but a threshold to these new places.*

*Isambard would have loved it since such places only receive a cursory statement or two.*

*I could name them. Tsolyem Ilxara, Tsarsairya Mui Aridialis, Zihastra, Euryasithe, Iscairyehne and its skin of ice, the oceans of Alalachel, Iaqaviyel and Ilaqaviyel and Ergriviathria where the golden moths were first born as golden centipedes.*

*Could name them all, could spend forever naming things but eventually names lose meaning, become just syllables jutting from a source.*

*I think he knew I was starting to feel that way, that's why*

*I noticed the sadness in his eyes. Some devolved, others evolved, but everyone changed. Except for me.*

*It's a hard thing to know that as you walk an infinite path you haven't changed yourself. Throughout the story, as it ran, I shepherded my charges. I took on the roles of various figures, twisting the narration one way or another, always keeping safe each way the world could run but there came a time during the last pages when I stopped, the dialogue halted, and everything . . . everything became just . . . silence.*

*I was on Tliantia.*

*The trick of Tliantia was that it caused some things to become two-dimensional. There were invisible spiders that killed without making a sound, but any person there would be . . . altered irrevocably. Altered even more than death provided.*

*You'd see men with half their faces missing only to realize they were simply pressed tight against what seemed an absent face. Or perhaps a hand would extend out five feet and turning it over, palm facing you, it would disappear, leaving the feel of razor wire in your hand where the man's hand lay.*

*And then there was her.*

*I think she was modelled off some fantasy of the author, always meant to be the hero with her deep red hair, soft features and blue eyes which shone brighter than anyone else's, always dressed in black, though the most distinguishing feature were her feet, flat and thin as a piece of paper and spread out like the blade of a leaf-shaped knife.*

*When I saw her in the city something changed in me.*

*Perhaps it had always been there since Gilgamesh, since Enkidu, since before the time of the fire and the wheel.*

*But seeing her the change finally fully flooded over me. But more. I became aware of the **need** to change.*

*I walked the dark cities of Tliantia a time and then went amongst my kind and told them I had to leave. They asked where I was going and I told them I was going into the real.*

*It was time for a new perspective.*

*"And what will happen after your time inside the real?" my old friend asked me.*

*"Perhaps nothing will happen or I will cease to be or I will die and be rewarded by ceasing to be. It's all the same to me."*

*After a small conversation, I departed, slipping the boundaries between one page and another, slipping the further boundaries between one second and another, that hidden time which dreams occupy, and out of this I stepped into The Real.*



## Chapter 2

### Grisaille

The library had closed but the man remained.

Sitting at his desk with darkness all about he poured over the pages trying to decipher the best collection of syllables, stumbling upon something that might be useful, or not.

This he placed in the word bank beside the others then continued thinking about the work at hand. The litanies of half-finished ideas jumbled together in his notebook by his hand, never making sense, existing only because, at the time, he had no use for them.

For a moment he turned up to look at the lamp overhead trying to use the light to distract himself from his mistakes.

Tiring of this he rose, went to the door opening it, allowing the cool metal of the handle to distract him further as he left.

Outside the night was also cool and the man stared a time at the stars above. The forest in the distance seemed like the broad hands of some hoary-headed god, but he ignored the imagery since he had used all that before.

How many times had hoary-headed gods been spoken of in his poetry or stars like eyes or the night like a woman? He'd grown rather sick of the iconography.

All there remained to do was write a tragedy or satire and be done with the entire enterprise.

Coming back inside he noticed the papers and for a time imagined them some continent, the ink the outline of various shores or archipelagos.

He returned to his chair and considered trying to envision the object of his purpose. The person would have to be stubborn, determined, and flawed in some obvious or subtle way and the fiction would hinge upon some failure on the figure's part.

Perhaps he was just writing about himself.

After a few more failed lines he stopped, turned the lamp off overhead, took the papers with him, and went outside again. As he did, he tried to perform one of those experiments he was taught when young.

After leaving the room he tried to envision it. There were the far walls lined with tomes leatherbound and the closer walls were surrounded by . . . no. The windows were rectangular and clear and . . . just no.

The lamp then. It jutted from the wall, curved down and up, and was gold . . .

He wanted to turn back but didn't bother. The scene in his head was as depressing as the scene he had just left.

The library was near the edge of the city so he had to walk some way to his home. As he walked, he imagined, as artists do, that he was being followed. There is paranoia in all creative souls since if what they create in their minds can be real this includes their nightmares.

He had just come near the fields which in older times had been execution grounds when he realized there *were* footsteps coming up behind him. Knowing there should have been no one else in the entire world awake at such an hour he turned.

He did not expect the girl.

For a second, he was convinced she had plumes like feathers on her head blue as a sea, and further plumes about her eyes. He could describe those eyes as predatory, cold, yellow, but all this faded and she seemed just an ordinary girl wearing a dark coat and skirts of red. How he could see her at all he never really understood. Perhaps he was simply so accustomed to the darkness that it had become a second country to him.

She spoke her name, he did likewise, and they got to talking. He pretended there was nothing strange in her being here, a stranger in a stranger land, nor she did fail to pretend there was

nothing strange in him being here on a dark roadway in the middle of the night beside an execution field. Going home.

He asked about her, she said she felt as old as the mountain hills. Don't we all, he asked? She smiled and agreed to that.

She said she was from a far country but she felt very familiar with this particular piece of ground. She had seen it once, (in pictures, she repeatedly assured him,) and found it breathtaking.

This was where an entire mythology had been born, she said.

Which one? he asked. She named it but he didn't know it. They spoke awhile about myths, their origins, and their meanings, and when he reached home was quite stricken by the girl.

His feelings, he imagined, he did not share with hers.

The truth might have been otherwise.

At any rate, he opened his door, and asked if she would be fine, she said she would, he closed the door and she evaporated into the wind.

And so, the girl settled into the small town she would call home, in the home she would die in.

## Chapter 3

### The origin of the species

The man got up.

Opening his eyes he realized the ceiling was still there, turning over his feet touched the cool floor followed by his recognition of it.

Breakfast then. The food he'd eaten a thousand times before, iterations on a theme. A slice of bread, some warm butter, a cup of . . . let's pretend it was coffee. Then to work.

The town was one of those small affairs people didn't have the time to think about. Small houses, and straight roads colour of dried dung if one was trying to be crude, though usually even crudeness evaporated, leaving only grey.

He worked at the library, this square building pretending to be more. It seemed as if no one was there and thinking back over the morning noticed no one else. Dismissing the rest of humanity as not mattering he entered the building and got to work.

He laid the papers carefully on the desk and tried to envision another way of saying the same thing. But what was it he was trying to say?

The girl entered then, coming behind him, he noticed her by the shifting of his perceptions, realizing he was being watched and so remembered.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Just looking about."

The girl went to a nearby shelf and pulled out a small leatherbound book. *Diary of Locusts*. Beside it was another which she also took. *These Masked Societies*.

She took these and went to a far desk beside a far wall, then glanced at her new possessions. The man turned back to his pages but his mind's eye continued staring at the girl.

"They're mine you know," he said finally, "I wrote those."

"I know," she countered, "that's why I'm looking at them."

The man scratched his chin and pondered. What did she think of his children? It was too soon to know if she had any regard at all but then why take the books?

Maybe it would be better if she started with a book of his poems . . .

As if knowing his thoughts she said she would read these first.

"Both at once?" he asked idly.

"Seeing whichever one is better than the other. Which do you think?"

"It's hard for a writer to know. Too often they either praise their worst children or despise their best. I suppose it all depends on you."

"I'm curious," the girl said, still not turning to the man who seemed so far away, "why scorpion women?"

"Hey, what?"

And here he rose and went over to her.

"You see, you wrote about scorpion women in both books."

"I don't know. A conceit I guess."

"What do they look like? In your head?"

"They look like scorpion women. I'm surprised you read so far ahead." And here the author peered down to his creation and seemed a moment to fall in . . .

For a moment he was standing in a scarlet desert. As he stood there confused, he watched a scorpion woman pass. For a moment she had a long scorpion tail and her skin was bronze but this flickered and then she had four arms and her eyes were blue and then another flicker and she just seemed an ordinary woman, naked, and identical to many women he had known yet there seemed scales of bronze about her eyes.

Then he stood before a great black tree and about this, these women clustered though sometimes their lovers were centaurs or minotaurs he was sure.

Girls were growing from the branches of these black trees, small replicas of their mothers and he could imagine their futures tended by their older reflections, embraced as lovers or daughters.

But never sons.

Then he fell out of the book again.

He was going to ask what happened but for some reason merely went back to his desk not saying a word.

"But what do they look like? You didn't answer my question," the girl said.

"Some questions authors don't answer."

"Because they don't want to?"

"Because they can't."

The two were silent for a time.

After about an hour no one else arrived. The sun slid across the sky steadily, the girl continued to read, and the man continued to fail to write, until, he was pretending he wasn't hungry.

Around midday, opposite the witching hour, the girl closed his books and stretched and the man was certain her arms were just like the blue wings of some exotic bird then arms again.

"May I ask . . .?"

"Ask?" he asked.

"Why?"

"Why what?" And here he turned toward her staring at her intently, or failing to. She seemed like the sun, one not meant to be stared at lest they go blind.

"Why are you still writing now?"

"I suppose because I want to."

"Do you though?"

"That's an impertinent question. One doesn't do things unless they want to do them."

"Does that include death?"

"No, but it does include dying. Death is something taken from our hands. Dying is the way we do things until the end."

"I wouldn't know."

"Well, you are young and the young never know anything. That's why they're young. I suppose we don't age, we just get worn down by the more we know."

"So, you want to keep writing then?"

"I suppose I want to, as much as I want anything."

Here she rose and went toward him and glancing down noticed the nearly blank pages, useless metaphors, bland cliches.

"How long does it usually take, to finish things?"

"Until it's done. Never before. A thing is never done until it is."

"I suppose that's true, I guess."

"I never asked, what do you do to pass the time?"

"I am a labyrinth," she said, "I am a winding path."

"Oh, you're a lawyer," he said, smiling.

"I am a servant of a specific law. That's true. Though not one you would know of."

"Well, in answer to your question about finishing things, as you can see it hasn't really begun so one must be patient. Nothing else to do except wait for things to begin. A thing can't be finished until you start it. And until it's started it won't end."

"So, if one never really had an origin they couldn't die."

"No." And here he spoke without adding anything unnecessary to the truth.

"I suspect you're right about that. So, could I ask you a favour then?"

"Favour? Suppose, depending what it is."

"Could you . . . kill me?" she asked.

"I'll just write it in my day planner. What time do you want to die?"

"I'm serious," and here she bent down to stare at him eye to eye, "I want to die."

"And I'm serious about knowing when and how, and why."

"I can't say why."

"Try."

"Because I have no origins, no beginning. I want you to give me one."

"Why me? Is there something special about me?"

"I like scorpion women," she said, "and back in Ur, they used to have scorpion women and black trees. There was a woman who wrote about them. I've been thinking about her more and more, where she went after . . . I'd like to join her. To join . . . everything when it's gone."

"Well," and here he turned the pages over to their blank sides, "I suppose I have an afternoon to humour a young woman. But if you have no origins what are you?"

"I am a labyrinth," she said, "I am a winding path."

"Well let's go from there and walk backward to where you imagine you first began."

"You are you a labyrinth. What does that mean exactly?"

They were outside in a field adjacent to the executioner's ground. Trees were standing idly by and still no other people came as if the whole world were reduced now to just the two of them.

"Every story began at some point. There was a moment before and there came a moment after. This means all stories exist as a duality, an origin, and an infinite copy. There are as many versions of your book as stars in the sky and compounding this if you imagine all books then you imagine there are no endings.



There is no ending. My kind exists to catalogue those infinite roads."

"I take it then others preserve the origin of the species?"

"Yes. I have a counterpart. He is a stranger to me as I am a stranger to him."

"Alright. Let's say I believe you. I have no reason to but if nothing else this will make an excellent story. I hope. These infinite roads you preserve, to what end? Why?"

"Because we have none of our own."

"Oh? And why is that?"

"We lack imagination. We cannot envision. We cannot dream. All we may do is occupy the masks of other creations for a time and then remove those masks for others to wear."

"You mean you remove your masks for the characters or do you mean you remove your masks to find another to wear?"

"Both, neither. Impossible to say."

"Alright. So how old are you? Assuming I believe you."

"Older than the wheel, the fire. We predate the first cities. We came before the written word, maybe even before language first separated from the thoughts of one to the minds of many. I can't remember anymore."

"And in all that time you have lived and collated our works? Alright. So why do you wish to end it all now? What is your reason? What set off the plot?"

And she showed him. She was on Tliantia and he was there beside her watching the half-crushed forms of people and there walking down the dark street was the girl with the razor-wire feet and her scarlet hair and blue eyes.

"Seems pretty but hardly see why she is your destruction."

"I mentioned a poetess in Ur, yes? That's her. Same features, same eyes."

"A red-haired, blue-eyed Mesopotamian girl? Maybe it's just me but I always assumed they were darker complexioned."

And here the girl laughed. It was an oddly shrill sound like the way hawks sound, in pain.

"Yes, exactly. Rarity is compounded on rarity. Do you know the odds of finding the exact same features thousands of years ago and then staring at those features again made by a man who had no reason to know them, in a place not of Earth . . . odds are past counting. Something has repeated itself.

"This is not the way of things."

"Coincidence is a writer's medicine. One can't expect the universe to always figure something it hasn't done before."

"But if she is here, now, where is *she*?"

"You don't mean the girl walking toward us, do you? You mean the poetess from Ur."

"For all our existence we have collected your stories, always avoiding the one question that both us and our opposites dare not answer. Where do you go when you die? We have walked in heavens, hells, purgatories, reincarnations of other lives but these are just stories you tell yourselves, voices echoing off the walls of the cave, hymns echoing off the walls of cathedrals. Where is the truth of your ending? In all our days we have never stumbled upon *that*. Where do you go when you go away?"

"If you've seen heavens and hells and purgatories and reincarnations more than I ever have shouldn't you know the answer already?"

Suddenly they were no longer on Tliantia.

They were in a great city and the sun overhead was like a long red eye and the buildings were suffused of shadows and people walked about all wearing the same features as the other.

"Where is this?"

"Chapter of a sequel that could have been. This is the Tlalym System. Same setting as Tliantia but a different locale. This is the home of the Uro-Shi'shiran.

"There was an entire subplot the author never got around to making, about an invasion and how those invaders were defeated centuries ago. But it wasn't enough to defeat them, the people of the Tlalym System cloned one of those soldiers making everything you see here. This is a city devoted to a single man divided."

"Seems a handsome enough fellow, or fellows. Why show this?"

"The soldier they chose was an especially sadistic one, that's why he was chosen. And each copy they made they distilled out his savagery, leaving only obedience. Imagine living the same life over and over, each person the same as you all having the same beginning, all knowing their corrupt origins . . . well.

"Do they all go to the same end?"

"I don't know. *They don't know*. Even if there was another book detailing each of their lives showing where they ended up, in hell, heaven, paradise, eternal suffering, nothing, it all comes out of the mind of a man who might only have dreamed of this place once. That's no foundation to decide your post-fate. And every person who ever imagined a heaven or a hell . . . can you imagine a colour you've never seen before?"

"I suppose I can't."

"When I saw her, I realized I might see her again, not just the character but *her* somewhere, that she might *be* somewhere but if so, I'll never see it because I really don't exist. Labyrinths don't have souls, only destinations. And you can't get where the dead are based only on a destination."

The man pondered this. By all logic he should have been screaming at the existential dread of being here, seeing a foreign sun, surrounded by men identical to another with this eldritch girl beside him casually discussing the origins of the human species and her place in it as one might mention a morning meal.

But existential dread only mattered if one was concerned their being was being threatened and being the author knew he was a solid piece of ground while all else was merely dissolving sand.

"Alright," he said slowly, "I can see your point. But if you have no imagination," and here he bent his head as if straining at the thought, "what do you do with ours?"

"We occupy, we preserve, we denote where mythologies branch and bleed."

"To what end? Forgetting your extinction what does your kind *do* with all this?"

"How will that answer the question of my ending?"

"So goes the world so goes the man, or woman, or . . . whatever the hell you are. If you can see all stories and their branching then take me to the ends of the world, take me to the day humanity dies when no more stories are written and no more deeds done. Take me to the day hell closes its gates and heaven shuts its door for the final time."

She did as she was asked.

## Chapter 4

### The spider people

*. . . the csaireb spider children, they who devoured their lovers after the embrace of love was done.*

*To them, there was no finer ending to a life than spent in the company of their murderers, each knowing perfectly the intimacy of the other, each certain time was ending for them now.*

*For after the death of one, the other would be compelled to never forget but spend their days looking backward and behind themselves in dread . . .*

The passage remained in his head even as they touched the dying Earth. He had a short vision of one of those spider women, their bodies the labyrinth for their young, each child running along their veins the way children might run sportingly in a maze then returning to take another path, only reaching the end when they'd grown old enough to know the way.

They arrived at the wasteland which was eternally still.

For a moment between the spider women and the wasteland, there spread before his eyes a city, whose streets were the pages of lost tales, whose towers were gilded of poet dreams.

This too faded alongside the spider women leaving only the wasteland behind. Leaving only them.

"This is the end of humanity?" the author asked.

"This is where the last of you fades."

"Where is this last man? Is it a man?"

"There." The girl pointed to a small rise on the flat surface of the end of things.

The man caught a glimpse of this before but ignored it, considering it too small to be the last of anything.

Then he walked over and came across the corpse.

This was the end of history, the concluding period at the end of a sentence that had begun with the fire and the wheel.

He imagined himself rolling the buried face to him to see the last geography of a continent now erased and meant to linger in all the days before, never to emerge a second after yesterday.

He didn't, leaving the body where it lay.

"So where are your people?" he asked.

"They are waiting. They are suspended in motion alongside our rivals here. We will have to wait for the next myth-makers to emerge, the next dreamers of dreams."

"And how long will that be? I don't want to be here longer than I need to. We haven't even packed a lunch for ourselves." Weakly he tried to smile but failed.

"We can move forward to see those who will come. But you asked why we take your imagination and it is because of this stillness now. We exist only so long as you are there to perceive us and reflect back our being onto ourselves. We have no motivation, no drive, and no purpose outside of your creations, so when you are gone, we are suspended in time between one existence and another. We savour your mythologies the way the drowning savours air."

"And you wish to avoid the pregnant pause by ending things?"

"How many have there been before you?" she asked.

"How many fires were lit before the first men came? I can't remember anymore.

"You asked who will come after you? Do you want to see? Do you want to know? That may explain my desire to end things."

"I suppose," the last man began to say, "it wouldn't hurt, well anyone but me."

A season passed then another, a year, a century, two, twelve, twenty. The wasteland remained, and the mountains in

the distance remained. Underground the man thought he heard the shuffling of feet and then by an age too old to count what seemed fingers emerged from the ground.

But they were too many to be from a human hand.

These fingers blossomed upward, followed by a hand, but no . . . not a hand. This was the body of *something*.

At first, he mistook it for a spider but it was the wrong shape, the wrong colour. Wrong size. This was followed by another, some invertebrate collection of worms strung together emerging on the wasteland which the man realized was the exact spot of execution ground he had lived beside when humanity was young.

These false spiders began to cluster together and as they did the girl kept staring at them, half haunted, half in awe until by some mad age the man realized they had come together to make an almost human form followed by another and another, a colony of parts raped into the likeness of a man.

"What are they?" he asked.

"They are passenger species carried in the echo of your forebears. There may have been many like these before your humanity, and after these are gone there may be many like them, again modelled from your humanity. But never human. What was human is lost, never to be regained."

The false men and women began to cluster about a fire exactly where the last human's body had lain and venturing close both author and eldritch crept close, listening. They were invisible to these beings whether by some alchemy of the girl's or some blindness preventing them from seeing former things, just as the man might not regard a marsupial lion or Precambrian child even if it crawled inches from his face.

"They are telling stories. I don't know the words but I know the meanings."

“My people are already awakening, as our rivals are. See,” and here a strange almost wasplike creature appeared, changing to a centipede, a beetle then sculpting to appear as the false men were, “there is one. Maybe it is Isambard but since their language is so radically different it won’t be his name anymore.”

In the distance a predatory bird appeared with blue metallic plumes and the author regarded this not as a bird but as some small girl or boy before those features again sculpted to appear as the ones about the fire.

“And it begins again,” she said, “collating and shifting words into meaning. Gods will be born here you know. And heroes. Here be dragons. Here be demons. Here be hell.”

“Here be heaven?” the author asked.

“The embryo of heaven perhaps. The word does not exist yet though.”

“And they will come and take all this into themselves?”

“Everything. In time these beings will form long caravans delivering their gospels to the wind and the farther shores. The words will be caught up by shore and sea and by all others like themselves, creating a history where there was none before.”

“And you people and your rivals come to pick the bones clean of memories, of dreams?”

Here the girl smiled.

“You make us sound like scavengers.”

“Well, you are certainly not predators despite what you pretend to be. You are not predatory, do not seek out your feasts. You wait for them to be born and die and then you come to sate yourselves.

“I suppose you are scavengers in that respect.”

As they spoke an eon passed. The almost-men and almost-women had become both by this time, hardening into the furtherance of their evolution, and in the distance where the



author's home had been a city had grown like coral blistering from a wound.

About them the girl's people and their rivals hovered or huddled, the author noting both ways in the middle of the hidden air.

"How long will these beings last? Collectively?" he asked.

"As long as mankind perhaps, or longer, or shorter. They are a composite race, passenger species running through the labyrinth of those bodies, flickers of consciousness emerging in a hand, an eye, a heart. They might not even have a word for war yet. Maybe they never even envisioned Cain slaying his brother."

"Without war, their world might linger longer?"

"Or they might end themselves from the boredom of peace. One never knows the end until it comes."

"Well what sorts of stories do they create?"

"Much like yours. Their myths walk aslant their realities. They have their heroes, their villains, their sins."

"Alright. Enough. *Stop.*"

And here the world stopped with the citizens of the air frozen in their tasks.

"Stop?"

"I have seen the end of my world, seen the beginning of another, seen your little friends dancing in the air, been given a great gift to stand behind the curtain.

"Now answer me this.

"What is the *fucking point* of you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your kind stands between one oblivion and another. You collect all the lost tales of a thinking race. Fine. And here you come to me, *me*, saying how much you want to end, to go to the place of the dead, where I imagine these spider people go and scorpion people and vine women and marsupial lion people and

humans, and I don't know, serpent women, and whatever else has lived on this globe.

"Okay, fine.

"But you can't end a life until you know what it was about. I just saw my world die, I should be terrified, full of grief, sorrow, and misery, but I'm not. You know why?"

"You're drunk?" she asked.

"Maybe. But that's not the point. The point is my people *lived*. We had weight, we had existence, not just on paper or in paintings, or stories. *We were*. Even if a thing is gone so long that it *was* it is. You want to see heaven? You want an origin to the species of you? You want an end? Okay. Take me home. I'll show you the city of the end of things."

And with that they did.

## Chapter 5

### The end

She had a social insurance number. She had a rotted tooth that needed tending to. On her sixth day of being in the town, she accidentally got hit by a car and spent six months with her right leg in a cast. She learned how to shit. She learned how to brush her teeth after seeing the dentist. She learned that rain could be cold.

The town was her embryo, her nursery.

The author did not do anything special.

He merely put her in a home and left her to the devices of being human. She could no longer leave into another book nor could she take him anywhere into the past or future. She was confined to one second at a time and only a single solitary piece of execution ground.

By her twentieth day, she experienced pain that did not leave. That was the car accident, when she walked into traffic, oblivious to the meaning.

After six months suddenly the cast's shell was gone and she realized how muscles actually felt and how bones solidified in the body. It was a growing strength to learn how brittle the flesh was.

A day after this she realized she had walked into traffic willingly, the car just out of the corner of her eye. And she realized after the shell had been taken away, she had done this because humanity had been too far a hill to climb.

She had wanted to die after twenty days but death had merely crouched nearby, as if mocking her.

The author often came during these first days to check in on his non-creation. After the accident and her healing, she realized there were two of her now.

There was the collector and there was she who had been born in this town. Her past unspun behind her some days, a past which had only grown in tomorrow. Her first birthday as a woman was likened back to her first birthday when she had been a little child, except she had never been a child. Until now.

She could have sped up time but this too the author prevented. She could have tried to contact her kin but this also was barred, leaving her only with other human beings, men and women who had origin and could only traverse one path, to one end.

The author all this time penned his magnum opus. It was about a world called Eligolis Ilxairos, an invisible wilderness, a glass wasteland, and upon it lay a demon-haunted city he claimed was named Kithriel Zhudan Xul. He wasn't sure where it came from, he only knew he had heard the name in some book he might have read.

The world spoken of had scorpion women and long dark wine canals and in their air lingered fire-insects burning for their desires and swimming beside them were predatory things plumed like falcons or ravens made of ice.

Few read the books but it was enough that they were.

Eventually, as these things happen, on a day of no special importance the world ended, for the author. Of course, if one imagines when they end so ends the world it was indeed the last day on Earth as if everything were rolled up and the scenery tossed away because an audience of one was no longer staring at the stage.

She was there at his funeral and afterward, living another twenty years, remembering all the years to come foreshadowing the past which was not, even as the past grew more secure all the time.

Finally, on her last day, she forgot ever being a creature of the air. How she died it is impossible to care about. One does not

notice a period at the end of a sentence with any more meaning than a silent pause.

Afterward, she was gathered to her people, of the town, and many spoke of their long association with her, some even mentioning their parents knew her when she was but a girl and had even known her parents, whose names the townspeople couldn't remember anymore. Her gravestone was placed among the others and in time the wind wore away even her name.

Somewhere the character of her remained, perhaps suspended in the pages of a book but if so, that wasn't her, any more than writing down a person's name distils their entire life to a piece of paper.

## Epilogue

### To end silence

Sometimes I suspect everyone believes they are lesser than they really are, all others are always superior to us. And with this logic in hand no matter our victories we will never feel it is enough, never reach the point of our own equality with the person living on the other side of our eyes.

The solution to such a dread I found, *at first*, is that we write a story where we are better than we think we are, that our history is grander than reality belies.

But that's not an answer though, you know.

I learned that lesson in time and it remained true all the days of my life. You can't make a life worth living by telling stories about it. The stories always come after.

The living always comes ahead of that.

I read many novels in my life, and stories and poems, listened to songs and hymns but though I did all this those artists never knew I listened to them.

That's why the living matters more than being dead or being read.

If a man dies alone and no one remembers him, did he ever live? Of course, he did, because only a fool thinks one needs another to validate their own being and existence.

That is the truth of the end of things, after the silence.